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# Transforming Personal Learning and Growth into Informative Research: Modelling a three level intersubjective process

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Philosophy

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# **Abstract**

This is a methodological study, inspired by my undergraduate experiences of Heuristic Research (Moustakas, 1990) and Co-operative Experiential Inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986). I became interested in social science research approaches that embrace the notion of people exploring their own experience through introspective, collaborative and creative processes. I questioned, ‘what makes it research?’ as I was interested in how the process of discovery I had experienced could be considered research rather than personal learning.

With co-researchers I identified personal growth as an outcome of research, I also recognised how it enhanced research findings. In this thesis I offer a model for transforming personal growth into informative research. The model is framed by three levels of inquiry based on introspection, interaction and the communication of research findings. I explored these three levels through my involvement in seven collaborative inquiry groups, engagement with subjective and introspective research and continued reflection on my own process. Activities are suggested which have been found to facilitate personal growth and transform it into informative research. This occurs through processes which allow the research to emerge and develop according to the needs and interests of the co-researchers involved.

I suggest the resulting model is of value as a research approach where empowerment and personal growth are a corollary aim, for those who wish to explore their personal or professional experience as a bridge to academic research and as a way of research co-existing with work and personal life.

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Acknowledgement and Dedication .....	5
<b>Chapter 1</b> - Introduction .....	7
<b>Chapter 2</b> - The story of my thinking .....	25
<b>Chapter 3</b> – Literature Review .....	40
<b>Chapter 4</b> – The Interim Model .....	68
<b>Chapter 5</b> - Research Process and Practice .....	83
<b>Timeline of Research Practices, Emerging Understanding and Relevant Appendices</b> .....	90
<b>Ethical Considerations</b> .....	108
<b>Chapter 6</b> – The Resulting Model: A reflection on the development of my understanding of the research process. ....	111
<b>Chapter 7</b> – Achieving Informative Findings: Theory emerging out of personal growth in the life stages project .....	193
<b>Chapter 8</b> – Motherhood and Work Apnoea: Two research projects that have helped and hindered my PhD study.....	208
<b>Chapter 9</b> – Application, Uses and Limitations of This Study .....	244
<b>Chapter 10</b> – Final Reflection.....	278
<b>References</b> .....	282
Appendix 1 .....	295
The Personal Element in Collaborative Research.....	295



Appendix 2.....	312
Reflection on Belonging .....	313
Appendix 3.....	317
The Theory and Experience of Person Centred Research.....	317
Appendix 4.....	329
Notes on Undergraduate Dissertations.....	329
Appendix 5.....	338
Examples of My Writing Process .....	338
<b>5.1 Researching Research and Living Life .....</b>	<b>338</b>
<b>5.2 Take my Word for it – I’ll tell it how it is .....</b>	<b>338</b>
Appendix 6.....	368
Examples of Collaborative Inquiry Groups .....	368
Appendix 7.....	389
The Hot-Seat Experience .....	389
Appendix 8.....	410
Fictional Group Story.....	410

# Acknowledgement and Dedication

A few years ago BBC Radio 4 ran a project in which they asked listeners to send in a summary of their life in six words; mine was:

‘A life blessed by special people’

The interesting, inspiring and genuine people who have been a part of my life are far more in number and quality than is fair. I do not know what I have done to deserve it but in relation to this thesis I have some specific words of gratitude:

Thank you Mum and Dad, you made me who I am and in doing so you wrote most of this thesis; ‘why be normal when you can be happy’

Thank you to all my co-researchers, the ideas I present are yours too and I thank you for helping me in my discoveries.

Thank you to Karen and Alex for your help with chapter 7 and to their partners and children who have made parenting such fun.

Thank you to my friends and family who learnt not to ask how it was going.

Thank you to Mum, Dad, Jamie, Pam, Rebecca and Laura for your practical and financial help over the years – I could not have done it without you.

Thank you to Bill Campbell for giving me so many chances – I know how much you have done for me.

Thank you to Neil Carey who, in all awareness of the connotations, told me to ‘grow a pair’. Your support has been fantastic – thank you for boosting my confidence and not putting up with my cowering; words cannot express my gratitude.

I save the biggest thanks for last –

Thank you to my long suffering husband, ‘my half orange’ who really has suffered.

Thank you for working so hard so I could follow my dreams.

Thank you to my boys, Oscar and Alfie, for making me live in the moment and letting me know this doesn’t matter in comparison to a missing Lego piece.

I am sorry for that unforgiveable phrase, ‘Not now, Mummy is working’ and I am sorry for the most boring summer holidays ever. I promise I will make it up to you.

To my family I dedicate my whole life, but this is my research.

**I dedicate this study to the person without whom I would never have started, carried on with, or finished this PhD, even if I didn’t do it on your watch...**

**To Paul Wilkins**

**colleague, mentor, but above all my friend;**

**for you, with love...**

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

This research is a methodological study in which I have examined and developed approaches to researching human experience that are introspective (involving the exploration of an individual's own experience) and inter-subjective (involving the exchange of subjective understanding between co-researchers). The result is a model for transforming personal learning and growth into informative research.

This model is intended as a framework for reflecting on the method of inquiry as a retrospective process, but through the explanation of the activities I have engaged in through the course of this study I include practical suggestions about how to initiate and develop the research process. The model is one which describes my own research process, but one that could be used by other researchers including those who are not from an academic background, for example service users, community groups and professionals to research practice and experience through integrating subjective understanding, understanding developed through collaboration and understanding as an academic endeavour.

Where I locate myself and my research in terms of field of study, or even discipline, is not straight forward. As a graduate of Human Communication, the field of communication is my background, however much of the learning making up this background was from counselling theory and experiential workshops and group work. The identification of personal growth and learning as an important tool for human inquiry has resulted from my knowledge and experience of the person centred approach (Rogers, 1957) and the practical application of this in research. I now see the way that my research model is based on communication and thus highlights communication as a research process, and vice versa.

I became interested in the research process, which is documented in the following chapter, and this led to my engagement with methodological considerations in the literature (as reviewed in chapter 3). I was particularly interested in approaches that embraced: the subjective, which is an awareness of researcher bias as a positive element of research; the reflexive, which is the deep reflection on researcher position and subjectivity; and introspection, which is the exploration of subjective experience. I sought other research and researchers showing a similar interest in and value for these approaches.

As I engaged in research and evaluated the process I began to see the importance of personal growth (illustrated by the papers in appendix 1&3). Although subjective research is often reported to be growth promoting (see chapter 3) I have recognised and explored the way growth can be used as a way of researching. I believe this is the contribution my research can make to social science knowledge and inquiry.

In part this research is about pulling together research approaches hailing from different fields and exploring the way common epistemology offers the scope for a synthesis of method and theory. I am informed by research from various academic fields including humanistic psychology; phenomenology; sociology, communication studies; hermeneutic philosophy and counselling and it is from all of these fields that I draw in developing my understanding.

The approaches I am interested in are those which embrace the person in research, extending the qualitative paradigm to allow the experience and subjective understanding of researchers and participants (hereafter termed co-researchers) into the research process. This movement has been referred to as ‘new paradigm’ (Reason and Rowan, 1981), ‘naturalistic’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), ‘post-

positivist' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) and 'post-modern' (Travers, 2006). In common with these, often termed 'new' approaches, (which are clearly no longer new) is the challenge to the positivistic approach to human inquiry and the exploration of alternative ways of researching human experience. The aim is to avoid the reduction of experience or humanity to measured, quantified and sterile generalisations and to do justice to the 'humanness of all those involved in the research endeavour' (Rowan and Reason, 1981: xi). These philosophies also resonate with a feminist approach to research where the orthodox research approach is seen as a patriarchal academic research structure (Cook & Fonow, 1986).

The model I present in this thesis works from the premise that research is intended to be of personal interest and importance to all co-researchers involved. This embraces the above principles through the democratisation of the research process, through allowing a focus to emerge that represents the interests and needs of the co-researchers at the time the research is conducted and through offering the potential for personal growth for those involved. Personal growth and learning is both an incentive for co-researchers and a means of enhancing research outcomes. The use of personal growth as a research tool is the key contribution to knowledge made by this thesis along with the model which provides guidance as to how this can be achieved.

The PhD study is an extension of MPhil research entitled, 'What Makes it Research?' This had arisen out of the interest I had developed in subjective and collaborative approaches to human inquiry as an undergraduate. The title question

was inspired by a reaction to a presentation of collaborative research into ‘life stages’, which I was a part of where one member of the audience responded, ‘That sounds like something that is very nice to do for an afternoon, but what makes it research?’ I embarked on my MPhil research with three aims:

1. To investigate how introspective research methods can be used in understanding human nature.
2. To question the role personal growth plays in research.
3. To consider how subjective research is presented to and received by an audience.

Through the analysis of undergraduate dissertations where subjective research methods had been used, reports resulting from collaborative groups in which I had been an active co-researcher and my own reflections and encounters with the literature my understanding regarding the above developed to give the following understanding as interim findings:

1. Introspective research is useful because how somebody attributes meaning to an event can be explored in addition to the study of what the experience is.
2. Personal growth in research encourages disclosure, and also encourages people to learn more about themselves, which can then be shared as part of the research.
3. Creative approaches to the representation of findings can portray the essence of an experience.

In addressing my initial aims my interest moved on from questioning *what* made the projects I had been involved in research in terms of justification, to questioning how

understanding was developed in these projects as a research process. I had established that the awareness of the process of understanding is what makes the venture research so I was interested in whether there was a process I had followed individually and with research groups that could be used by others. During the MPhil phase of my research I began to recognise common philosophies in the approaches I was studying and I began to question how this could be synthesised into one method for inquiry. I had found that members of collaborative research groups reported personal learning and an individual research experience that seemed to run parallel to the group research. My feeling had been that within the co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986), individuals also engaged in the introspective process of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990).

I continued to question how the outcomes of the research I had been involved in could be presented to an audience as I wondered how a collaborative and/or subjective understanding could be conveyed as research findings. Wilkins et al (1999) and I in Mitchell-Williams et al (2004, appendix 1) attempt to do this through co-authored papers but these represent the primary authors' editing and writing up of the research rather than a genuine collaborative representation.

In clarifying my understanding of the separate areas of my inquiry through a creative process, I began to see a visual representation of how my understanding could be formed into a research model (explained in chapter 4). This presented two further aims as I moved forward in extending the study to PhD:

1. To create a methodological model for subjective/introspective and/or collaborative research.



2. To ‘test’ the effectiveness of this model in terms of informative, developmental and transformative outcomes.

The model I created was a framework for viewing research as operating on three levels. I describe these levels as:

- Level One: ‘Me’

Subjective research focused on the individual researcher’s experience as understood through an introspective process

- Level Two: ‘Us’

Collaborative research where understanding is developed *between* co-researchers.

- Level Three: ‘Them’

The process of communicating the understanding resulting from level one and/or level two to an audience.

Despite the aim of the creation and testing of a model, the outcomes of this research are not simply about offering a prescriptive and diagrammatic way of doing research and the verification of this through a ‘testing process’. I developed the model through my reflections on past research projects and through using the model for new ventures including my approach to this study. I recognised the way a transition through the levels I had outlined facilitated a development of understanding and thus allowed for new knowledge to emerge. Rather than a ‘testing’ process there was an iterative re-conception of the model which moved my understanding from the simple model as described in chapter four to a deeper understanding of the processes involved as discussed in chapter six.

The activities and processes which I have found to transform understanding of human experience through the levels of inquiry are predominantly about creating a climate for personal growth. These include:

- Organic emergence – Allowing a focus of inquiry to emerge according to the needs and interests of the researcher(s)
- Pre-propositional knowing – The recognition of understanding developed before a focus was identified
- Creativity - the use of creative practices from art therapy to explore experience
- Reading and writing – as introspective and interactive activities
- Conversation and storytelling – as both data gathering and analysis in a ‘transformation of meaning’
- The use of the person centred approach to create a climate for growth and enhance the richness of outcomes

In this thesis I offer this way of facilitating personal growth and transforming it into informative research as a model which can be used and built upon by others. The original knowledge of this work is the recognition of personal growth as offering the potential for academic learning and the model and the constituent processes as an approach to research.

The model is one which illustrates a subjective process of research and in keeping with this my exploration of it is a subjective process. This is not just a model of subjective research – it *is* a subjective model which is based on my experiences of research and a reflexive process which has allowed me to create and ‘test’ it through an iterative process. This does not mean it is only useful in explaining my own

process; I discuss the ways it can be useful for other researchers in forming understanding from personal experience and practice into academic research in chapter 9. There is the potential for a practical use of the model in understanding and changing environments, for example in health, social care, community settings and education following the precedent set by action research (developed out of the work of Lewin, 1946).

Throughout my PhD I have worked with groups achieving new understanding on subjects including life stages, feelings of connectedness, relating, learning and the effect of early family life on personality development. The focus of the research in each of these projects was allowed to emerge out of an initial period of time together resulting in a subject of inquiry that was of interest and importance to all members of the group. Understanding developed in these groups through a process of personal growth, which was facilitated by activities that are discussed in chapter six.

Throughout this thesis I will reflect on a collaborative inquiry into life stages and apply the stages and processes of the model to that project. This will demonstrate how the model can be used to facilitate personal growth and transform this into informative research. In chapter 7 I will discuss the emerging theory from the life stages research and how this can inform others and contribute to academic knowledge. Distinctions will be drawn between this project and a group where no informative theory was recognised to highlight the processes necessary to transform the experiential venture into research.

My own experience is the ‘data’ for this study which is discussed in chapter 5 and this includes my involvement in seven collaborative research groups: in one case as

an undergraduate; in two groups as a participant involved for the purposes of this research; in working with reports from the group members including one group I was not actively a part of; and as the facilitator of three groups, once in explicitly testing the model and twice in my role as associate lecturer. My influence in the groups where I was a participant was no less than those where I was the official facilitator, despite the potential variation in the level of power I held in the groups. If there was any difference, I felt I held more power to explore my own experiences and share them with the group when not acting as the facilitator because of the responsibility I felt for the group when in this role. In addition to the group experiences are the experiences of my individual introspective inquiries (Belonging, see appendix 2 for a reflection on this; Motherhood and Work Apnoea, see chapter 8; and this overall study). I also engaged with other's introspective work including the reading of undergraduate dissertations, conversations with co-researchers and published reports.

My research experiences inspired the formation of the interim model (see chapter 4) and later provided a means to check my assumptions and develop the model to include further identification of integral processes (my process and practices leading to this development are detailed in chapter 5). I identify processes that create the movement of understanding and explain how I began to see inquiry using my approach as more fluid and cyclical than in the earlier linear model in chapter 6. Following this I began to see the need to return to the separation of the research as operating on three levels in order to explain the development of my ideas, this changed my understanding of the third phase of the research journey through my own engagement with a level three process and the recognition of this as a process of making explicit the informative findings as well as the communication of a

resulting subjective or inter-subjective understanding of phenomena (discussed in chapter 6).

I address the reasons for the drawn out process of my PhD research in chapter 8. I have been plagued by a psychological inability to write up my research followed by a resistance to handing it to anyone to pass comment on. Through a study running parallel to the wider PhD research I have explored this as a disorder I term 'Work Apnoea'. I have uncovered elements of this that relate to a lack of confidence in my own thinking and abilities coupled with the difficulties of 'fitting' my research process into the structured format of a PhD thesis. This experience of fitting into the format is also reported by Doloriert & Sambrook, (2011). I conclude in my later chapters that this process of 'fitting in' has actually resulted in my clarifying my research process, which does not simplify but enriches my understanding. In my final reflections on this research I have begun to understand the way in which a key element of this overall study has been my personal difficulties in moving away from a science based evaluation of research in reflecting on the value and the 'findings' of my own study.

The experiences of 'Motherhood' and 'Work Apnoea' are explored and explained through the use of my model (chapter 8) but beyond the focus of my own struggle to research this also forms part of the model in addressing how perceived barriers to the research process can be utilised as part of the research. I have come to regard the sporadic phases of my engagement with my research as a positive element of my process, akin to the phases of immersion and incubation outlined by Moustakas (1990) where the researcher cycles through periods of engagement with the research and periods of withdrawing from it in order to allow ideas to 'brew' or 'simmer'.

This offers possibilities for the applicability of my model, as the dimension of my personal (arguably gender based) struggle is incorporated into the emergent model making this a useful resource for those researchers intimidated by both the notion of research as an all-consuming process that cannot co-exist with work and family life or those assuming research is the privilege of those they perceive to be much more intelligent and capable. I see the model as being one that could be of use to people who are not ‘researchers’ or ‘academic’, hence my assertion that it is a useful approach for groups of practitioners, community members or service users.

### Guide to the Thesis

The ordering of the content of this thesis follows the development of my thinking, so it is roughly chronological, but the reflection on my process means that the understanding I share is one that has been developed through the research meaning all chapters are the result of the understanding developed through the PhD research. On reflection I realised there were three phases of my research: A pre-propositional phase (when I was building understanding that would inform my model but before I had formed it); a phase of reflecting on and developing the model (my activities during this phase are outlined in chapter 5); and a phase where I created the communication of my findings (this thesis) where new understanding of that process, and a developed understanding of my findings occurred.

Through my research, and emerging from my early research questions about the representation of research, I have developed a theory about the need for subjective research to be both explanatory and expressive (this is discussed in chapter 6).

Explanation involves classifying and conceptualising to build theory and expression is required when meaning is interwoven with experience so needs to be discovered or created (Reason & Hawkins, 1998: 79-80). I have concluded through this study that subjective research can inform through emerging theory but can also aid understanding that is based upon a felt sense; a tacit or holistic knowing of an experience. In recognising the need for both clear explanation and the expression of my feelings and my experiences this thesis contains both structured and unstructured elements. My process, my practice, my emerging model and the resulting understanding will be ‘explained’ and ‘expressed’ in this thesis as detailed below.

### **Phase One**

The early development of my understanding is detailed in chapters 2 and 3 which I later refer to as ‘phase one’ of the research where I engage with the subject of inquiry (a process explained in chapter 6). This includes the later identified processes of organic emergence and pre-propositional knowing.

### **Chapter 2**

The following chapter gives an autoethnographic account of my personal background, illustrating experiences that proved to be a catalyst for my research interest and the story of how my thinking developed. This is an *expression* of my personal approach to research and represents the importance of the individuality of the researcher being clear and present in subjective inquiry.

### Chapter 3

A review of the literature in which a comprehensive account of writing and research in the field of subjective, introspective and collaborative research is given. This follows the conventions of the traditional literature review giving *explanation* and justification for my research and establishing the precedent which I have been inspired by. The literature is also data for this study in the way that it informs my understanding and provides a way of checking my developing assumptions.

### **Phase One →Phase Two**

### Chapter 4

The model is explained in its initial form, which was a research outcome established in the early stages of the research. As such it arose out of my experience as detailed in chapter 2 and my engagement with the literature as detailed in chapter 3.

I give a simple explanation of the three levels of inquiry which frame my approach and a reflection on the process of creating this model. I discuss the way in which an illumination or statement of what is known is followed by a reflection on the preceding pre-propositional knowing and organic emergence. For this thesis chapter 4 is the result of the pre-propositional knowing shared in chapter 2 and 3. The creation of the model allowed me to move into the second phase of the research.

### **Phase Two**

### Chapter 5

This is an account of my method of research as a retrospective process. My research activities are explained, including a discussion of what constitutes data, analysis and



results. I detail the way in which the ‘testing’ of the model is a refining of the model and outline the practices through which I have reflected and extended my understanding. This includes a timeline detailing my research activities and the chronological development of my ideas including reference to how chapters of the thesis and the appendices offer further illustration.

## Chapter 6

The resulting, developed model is discussed in detail with the inclusion of processes identified through my research practices. This gives a new shape to the model where my vision of research is a fluid process rather than a linear progression. I highlight the need to re-impose a structure on the process in order to understand it and explain it clearly.

This chapter is intended to be a chapter from which instructions on ‘how to’ research using the model could be extracted. Text boxes including the simple description of processes and an account of how the levels, activities and processes relate to the PhD study as a whole are given.

The sections of the chapter regarding phase one and phase two of research are given as *explanatory* accounts including examples of activities and processes to aid personal and group learning and growth which I argue moves understanding through the levels and phases of the research process.

## Phase Three

I conclude chapter 6 with a section on the movement to phase three of the research which involves the level three process of communicating any understanding

resulting from research to an audience. This is written as a reflexive account on my own process of finding an approach to communicating findings from my research. As such this section of the chapter is less structured and is an *expression* of my desire to incorporate both creative elements that convey the essence of an experience and necessary structured accounts that aid the clear communication of informative outcomes.

## Chapter 7

This chapter illustrates the potential for informative outcomes through an *explanatory* reflection on the life stages project using the model. The way in which the emerging theory resulted from the activities described throughout the thesis is highlighted with a discussion about how this emerging theory could contribute to academic knowledge. A comparison with the group that did not reach informative findings is given to make explicit the way elements of the model are necessary to progress the research.

## Chapter 8

My studies of ‘Motherhood’ and ‘Work Apnoea’ are shared to highlight the importance of these aspects of my research and to give an illustration of the way the model can be applied to individual inquiry. Embodied within my experience, and therefore represented as an aspect of the research process, are these two personal experiences that I feel have helped and hindered my study. The time it has taken for me to complete this PhD has been due to lengthy periods of withdrawal from it which were both unavoidable and self-created. I have carried, given birth to and been mother to two children, I have been through many life changes and I have needed to devote time to paid work, which to the detriment of this study I have

privileged. I do not claim to be alone in facing these challenges. In part the outcome of this research is a consideration of the way my own process and the resulting model can be of use to researchers who face this challenge of combining family life, practice and study.

Having become a mother during the course of this study the change in my personal identity has had an impact on who I am as a researcher. In transforming personal growth into informative research aspects of the researcher's life which are part of this growth should be recognised and explored. In chapter 8 I include the study of my personal development through motherhood, in particular reflecting on collaborative research with two friends focusing on the importance of peer support in facing feelings of judgement as mothers. The battle of confidence and judgement is mirrored in my experiences of being a researcher.

This is an *expressive* chapter and includes the creative representation of my experience of motherhood through poetry.

## Chapter 9

The uses and applications of the model are considered in establishing the contribution to knowledge this thesis offers. This includes the possibilities for individuals wishing to cross the bridge from experiential understanding through practice, to research understanding as an academic endeavour. I make clear the contribution to knowledge that this thesis makes is the recognition and description of a method for transforming personal learning and growth into informative research. The limitations of my proposed approach and this study will also be discussed.

## Chapter 10

A final reflection allows my personal story to conclude this thesis. In this final chapter I return to an unstructured and *expressive* approach to my writing which provides a storied ending to the thesis. In ending the thesis in this way I remind the reader that this is a subjective and personal study which has not been completely separate from my personal life and which is reflective of who I am as a person. I advocate the clear presence of the individuality of researchers in research representations and this chapter illustrates the relationship between my own personal growth and my academic research findings.

In this thesis I do not present my theories as anything other than my own interpretation (the precedent for this is established in chapter 3). This is not illustrative of a lack of rigour as my interpretations are based on a decade of involvement in this research and a constant reflexive process. In the same way as I have written this thesis subjectively, I expect this piece of work to be received subjectively; anything I have written should be questioned by the reader. In following my model researchers should amend it in terms of their own philosophies and how their own research and ideas evolve. At its heart the model is designed to encourage researchers to apply their own methods and approaches to it. My contribution is a framework to aid reflection and a description of processes which enable the transformation of everyday personal or professional learning into informative research through the attention paid to personal growth. I give my ideas so that others may use them in developing their own understanding. Any interaction between the reader and what I have written works to extend knowledge

and understanding whether the reader criticises, agrees with, or is unsure about my ideas. Communication is always informative.

## Chapter 2 - The story of my thinking

### Phase One

The content of this chapter represents my pre-propositional knowing. This is the story of the understanding and philosophy I entered the PhD study with and it is an expressive, unstructured piece with the aim of giving the reader an insight into who I am as both a person and a researcher. This reflection establishes the roots of my approach.

I have always had an interest in people, something I inherited from my father. As I was growing up I loved to read and I only ever read fiction. I can't actually recall reading any factual books for pleasure, oh apart from a biography about a serial killer, but this was about someone's life which always makes things more interesting. From my mother I inherited a love of soap operas and T.V. dramas; not just a love but an addiction; I think that all this has had an influence on my research, or rather who I am, which is the essential factor in a subjective inquiry. My attraction to fiction and the stories of people's lives could have been something about fiction as a way of learning about people and human experience. I found fiction a source of knowledge and a way of understanding others as suggested by Green (2010) in his discussion of literary cognition.

I studied sociology at A-Level and during one lesson the teacher talked about the dissertation research that had been part of his degree. I think that it had something to do with standing on the street and asking people survey questions. At that

moment I made a mental note to never go to university because I was so put off by the idea of doing research, particularly if that involved asking strangers questions.

So here I am writing up my PhD research, once repulsed by the idea of doing any kind of research I have spent the past – let's not mention how many years – researching, and in fact researching research! Perhaps the whole disgust bit makes me more qualified to be studying the act of research; perhaps it is part of the research!

My interest in people and their lives was obviously a stronger drive than the fear of research because I did end up at university studying human communication. Initially in learning about qualitative approaches I was particularly attracted to thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) due to the way it involved working with people's stories but I found extracting themes broke up and simplified the experience being studied. I then became fascinated with heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) as an approach to research that seemed to rely more on what I felt were natural human processes such as intuition, which are subjective and allow the researcher to look at their own experiences and interpretations. The presence of people's stories in research made me feel energised and enthusiastic about the possibilities of using my own skills and experiences to research in a way that was meaningful to me.

When I read *Loneliness* (Moustakas, 1961) I felt like I had, in some strange way, found myself. It was like finding a new religion; receiving a call from the god of research; stumbling into my own promised land. The way that Moustakas had written about his experience with stories about other people made me understand loneliness in the same way I understood soap operas and novels; I understood from within myself. At the same time as understanding loneliness on an emotional level I also gained knowledge about a human condition. As I am writing, it occurs to me that reading *Loneliness* gave me an illumination – like Clark Moustakas passed his illumination onto me (see chapter 3 for an explanation of the term ‘illumination’ and chapter 6 for a discussion of how this is significant in relation to the model and the communication of research).

So I read *Loneliness* and headed straight for my supervisor’s office. I threw myself into the chair and he asked if I had any thoughts about my dissertation.

“I read *Loneliness*,” I said bluntly.

“And?” he asks.

“I wish I had written it,” I groan.

“So do I,” he replies and I feel a bit of relief that he feels the envy too.

“Mmm”, I say, not knowing where I go from here.

“So what do you do from here, there is no reason why you can’t do a similar study, even carry his study of loneliness further through your own experience”



“mmm but the thing is I don’t feel lonely”

“go on”

“well when I was reading loneliness I just kept thinking about how I wasn’t actually lonely, not at the moment anyway and well I feel the opposite really”

“mmm,” his ‘mmm’ is more optimistic than mine

“I feel a sense of belonging with people, and with nature and everything,” I say

“so maybe that is what you should research,” he suggests

“like Moustakas says, the other half of the organic whole?” I ask almost to myself

“well yes and you could use the heuristic method, and your reaction to loneliness as a starting point,” he agrees.

I shuffled to the edge of my seat and lost track of what he was saying. I just wanted to run out of the office and get started.

Choosing to research belonging was something that came out of my interest in my own experience: why did I feel a sense of belonging rather than loneliness? The starting point for understanding and justifying subjective research is that there is a reason we become interested in our subject area in the first place. The question I learnt to ask is, “but why do you want to research that?” which usually results in a personal story about why the person who wants to design fifty questionnaires really wants to understand the subject area, and it is usually because they want to

understand, or talk about, their own experience. Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Anderson (1998) reflect the same thinking.

Guided by theorists embracing new paradigm ideas (for example Reason and Rowan, 1981) I began to take the view that we are all humans so why not research ourselves? We can understand ourselves better than we can understand anyone else. Equally, why assume that we can learn more about other people than they can know themselves? The role of expert is traditionally assigned to the researcher, when really the person with all the knowledge when we are researching human experience is the person who has that experience (Moustakas, 1990; Heron, 1996; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) This notion resonates with the person centred approach (Rogers, 1957) as discussed in the literature review although it feels like there is more trust in the experiencing person in therapy than there is in research. Person centred practitioners have continuously searched for approaches to research that embrace person centred principles, Rogers wrote in 1961 (pg200),

The better therapist I have become (as I believe I have) the more I have become aware of my complete subjectivity when I am at my best in this function. And as I have become a better investigator, more 'hard-headed' and more scientific (as I believe I have) I have felt an increasing discomfort at the distance between the rigorous objectivity as a scientist and the almost mystical subjectivity of myself as therapist.

This, O'Hara (1995) believes, was a point at which he began to value more personal accounts as he searched for 'a methodology that could elucidate and critically evaluate the link between his own inner reality and the external reality to which he

was attending' which made him an unwitting postmodern pioneer (O'Hara, 1995: 45). Wilkins, writing in 2010 continues this search in questioning how research can be person centred and cites the use of heuristic and co-operative approaches as illustrative of a person centred approach. My own search for a way of researching that feels right for me reflects that of Rogers, perhaps this points to a need for a personal approach.

Human Inquiry is research into the human condition. We are curious about our own species, the experiences people go through and how they make sense of their lives. So if researchers are humans then they (or we) often neglect the most valuable resource for research: themselves (or ourselves). Traditional methods, both quantitative and qualitative, do not make use of some of the tools for understanding we seem to possess in everyday sense making through seeking objectivity rather than embracing subjectivity. My interest is in a move from a reliance on cause and effect conclusions to trying to understand thoughts and feelings as part of the individuality of human experience. Qualitative inquiry methods such as structured interviews and thematic analysis, as I see it, operate somewhere between this idea of understanding and the traditional positivistic view of research as analysing and proving (echoed by Ellis, 2004) This leads me to consider the construction of meaning as part of my research journey and this is explored through the literature (Chapter 3)

Early on in my research when tentatively testing some of my assumptions I conducted a research methods workshop with A-level students of media studies as

part of the 'Excellence in Cities' initiative. I began by asking these co-researchers two questions: firstly, "what is research?" and secondly, "how do you learn about things in your own life?" Answers to the first question were those such as: finding things out, learning and gaining knowledge and information through surveys, questionnaires and interviews. These are common responses to this question, (I have also asked it of undergraduate students and even friends and relations who make the mistake of asking about my research). Answers to the second question, 'how do you learn about things in everyday life' were quite different. Typical responses were, T.V, radio, newspapers, observing other people, talking to other people, reading books and magazines. This different nature of these responses illustrates my point about taking research in a direction that embraces the way we learn in everyday life, but applying a more rigorous and accountable approach.

When I began my PhD research I had already observed this difference between learning and understanding in life and what we see as worthy academic research. I wondered why there was this difference, not only in the way 'data' was collected, but in the way it was analysed and the way findings were communicated. Most people do not wander into a library to read a few academic journal articles as a way of finding things out, so the way researchers pass on information could also embrace some of our everyday habits or ways of engaging with 'something' that helps us understand the human condition. As a result could the communication of research findings be more effective and more accessible in that a more everyday approach makes the research understandable?

The effectiveness of the communication of research depends on who it is for and its purpose. I have been driven by an idea that research could be more accessible and understandable, not just to academics. In trying to encompass a democratisation of the research process should any outputs not be understandable by the many rather than the few who understand particular jargon and convention? This is a philosophical ideal but more practically subjective research is about understanding rather than knowledge, as I see it, and therefore a traditional paper is not always appropriate (I write from my personal experiences of trying to fit my understanding resulting from research into this traditional form).

Life is complex and never black and white, so why should research always try to simplify experience to explain it. If an experience is confused and messy this is how it should be understood – in the same way. In my early encounters with research I felt a lack of interest in sanitised statistics and even qualitative studies that dissected people's experiences into themes and categories. Perhaps the difference is whether the intention is to express or to explain (Reason and Hawkins 1988: 79 as discussed further in the following chapter).

A key element of my view of research is the notion that if we want to understand another person's experience, we need to empathise or put ourselves 'in their shoes'. This idea that we put *ourselves* in their shoes points to the fact that we do not cease to be ourselves in order to understand someone else. We understand from our own 'frame of reference', we are not objective but highly subjective. We learn about experiences and try to understand other people's in our everyday lives as illustrated, for example, by the popularity of people's problems being aired and solved on

television talk shows and the level of interest in reality television. So why do we look for a different strategy in order to call this process of understanding ‘research’?

If research is a subjective process, then each person involved in the research, be it researcher, researched, or the reader of a research report (the fact that reading is interactive is discussed in chapter 6) has an effect on the research itself because of the way it is interpreted (Ricoeur, 1994). A person’s character, previous experiences, and previous knowledge and assumptions all have an influence on their understanding and explanation of a phenomenon. For example, experiences of bereavement will differ according to a person’s previous experiences of bereavement, their religious or spiritual views and so on. All such factors, and importantly the personality of the experiencing person cannot be reflected when a subject is discussed in terms of themes and categories. A holistic understanding of experience is important to realise the relationship between various factors contributing to how a person has created the meaning that shapes the experience for them.

So, if we leave experiences as they are and assume they stand alone as research rather than needing to be combined with other stories after being broken down into separate comparable issues and themes, then there is an issue about what makes something research rather than a story told. This issue will be discussed and addressed throughout this thesis as it has been an important question throughout. For now I point to the fact that it has long been accepted that a case study is a valuable method of researching and communicating knowledge to an audience (Stake, 2000: 439).

However, subjective projects done by a researcher on themselves, although widespread, are criticised (in my personal experience) for being narcissistic (see Laughlin, 1995: 1) and unrepresentative. The continuation of this discussion is picked up in the literature review.

Considering the idea that we learn in life without entering into structured research projects, in 'real life' we do not need to know one hundred people telling us about one particular experience to formulate assumptions about it. In fact I can't think of any life event I have gained an understanding of which has involved my communicating with more than a handful of people, and usually it is the result of conversations with only one or two people. We will make judgements from one story that we hear, this is then strengthened or amended when we hear another story, or even when we rationalise that it would not be the same for everyone (which Habermas, 1981 referred to as communicative rationalisation). Eisner (1997: 270) suggests, "We all generalise from numbers of one and make adjustments that seem appropriate in the process. To do this we think analogically and metaphorically and settle for plausibility"

With regards to the issue of giving a general representation of society from one person's story there is always a reflection of the time and the culture we live in within an individual account. Our understanding of historical times and events has long relied on stories about one person, or one family, for example we can look at the diary of Anne Frank (1993) and the way it represents the life of a Jew in hiding during the Second World War. The popularity of this published diary shows the

interest people have in individual stories. Perhaps this is about feeling the essence of an experience which Moustakas (1990: 52) suggests we should communicate in a creative form as the result of research. This is further developed as a research approach in evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) where the researcher writes in an engaging way to explore and illustrate their experiences as situated within a certain social context. In research the questions we ask say something about the society we live in, and human nature itself. This points back to the idea that as researchers we do not cease to be humans, Moustakas (1990:15) writes, “With virtually every question that matters personally there is a social – and perhaps universal – significance.”

What is important in subjective research is being clear about the fact that it is one person’s story and one person’s interpretation of a situation. If both researcher and reader are aware of this then they can reflect on the way that their own, and other people’s interpretations affect what is presented. This does not pollute the research, but enhances it. I discuss this in more detail later (chapters 5 & 6). When I think of an individual subjective inquiry I think of developing my understanding of my experience through engaging with other people’s stories meaning my resulting understanding is informed by the experience of others and is not so narcissistic or individualistic as it may appear.

So we may create knowledge and understanding in our everyday lives, and I value research that in some way mimics this process, but it is the uncovering of these



creations and gaining an insight into how they were created which forms the research challenge.

So far I have explained subjective research as being a personal reflection of experience; that is the researcher researching themselves. I have also discussed our interpretation of other people's stories and their influence on the way we understand things. This, of course, is not a one-way process. In real life we do not have one way conversations. Neither does one friend sit and ask another a series of questions designed to focus on an experience they have recently encountered. We have conversations during which more than one person talks about their experiences, their thoughts, and maybe what someone else has told them. Topics of conversation evolve because of common interests between the people present. The outcome of such conversations is a mutual understanding, even if the conclusion is to agree to disagree. More often than not there is not a set end to a discussion but the conversation will evolve until it is about something completely different.

My view of research follows on from the Reason and Heron (1986) desire to research *with* people rather than doing research *on* them. This applies to structured collaborative research projects where a group of people intentionally enter into a venture as co-researchers but I also consider whether research is always co-created between the actual 'researcher' and any other person who influences the study through their stories, conversations, or even written work such as published papers (chapters 3, 5, 6 & 7).

This idea of participants as co-researchers draws attention to the fact that those contributing to the research are not passive subjects but active agents (Reason and Heron, 1986: 458). All co-researchers should be interested in the research topic. The reward and incentive for taking part in research that is subjective and collaborative should be in the drive for self- discovery and the telling of one's own story. I used to assume that it is a chore to take part in another person's research but when it is a collaborative and personally developmental process it is as important to co-researchers as it is to the primary researcher. I realised this when I researched belonging as an undergraduate and I felt I was asking too much of my co-researchers but later I found that they would have been willing to contribute more, for example through writing their personal findings from the research. As humans we like to tell our stories and share our experiences, as Eisner (1991: 2) interprets,

The drawings of animals on the walls of the caves of Lascaux were efforts humans made some twenty thousand years ago to tell of their experience, and perhaps, of their aspirations and fears.

The exchange of ideas and experiences to increase knowledge and understanding is a natural and constant process. It is not confined to defined acts of research and it is always valuable both personally and in a wider sense, if we consider learning as contributing to a universal library of knowledge that is not contained in books, but within people.

So thinking back to my personal interests and how they evolved, I now see that my interest in people's lives and people's stories both real and fictional has led to my seeking a research process that gives me the level of engagement and automatic

understanding that I get when I am engrossed in a television drama or true life story. What I mean by ‘automatic’ understanding is the kind of empathic understanding that does not involve the laboured untangling of facts. I do not sit watching Coronation Street with a notepad and pen so that I retain every detail of an event. I do not have to transcribe every line of a conversation with a friend to understand their experience. Understanding in life just happens; because we are interested. The social nature of human beings necessitates the understanding of others and equips us with ways of doing this. In everyday understanding we understand the whole of an experience without untangling the parts. I want research to mirror and embrace this process. I want to feel the energy when researching that I feel when I have a really good conversation with a friend.

It is common sense that in trying to understand for a piece of research we should use methods that we are so skilled at using we are not always aware we are using them. In this way all people are trained, skilled researchers and we do not need to research them; they can research themselves and we can learn from them, whilst wearing our own shoes.

## Life Stages: How the project embodies the above philosophies and how this aided the development of findings

The life stages project was reliant on conversation and a naturalistic approach that reflected the above philosophies. All members elected to be a part of the inquiry group but with no knowledge of *what* we would research. My motivation to be a part of the group was more driven by the prospect of interaction and a certain level of sharing and growth that I thought would be involved than the prospect of 'researching'.

The focus of 'life stages' emerged out of our time together (discussed in chapter 6) meaning it was of interest and significance to all of us. The personal nature meant that we were focused on our own experience and that we explored this subjectively which enhanced the depth of the research. We understood from our own frame of reference but as the person-centred approach characterised our way of being together we endeavoured to be accepting of one another and to understand each other's stories empathically. (see appendix 3)

My learning during this group about the role of conversation in research was the basis for my conceptualisation of 'transformation of meaning' where I saw that the conversations we had operated as an analytical process, as well as the initial stories that were shared in these conversations being the 'data' for the study. This allowed for a research process that had the naturalistic dimension I discuss above and which allowed all co-researchers to be both co-subject and co-researcher at all times.

It was clear in this project that we were all active agents and that we felt an equal responsibility for and investment in the research. We all felt we were 'present' in the research and that we were able to be open and honest. Beyond this, the research was addressing a need for the members of the group as it helped us through a transitional time in our lives (see appendix 1, chapter 6 and chapter 7). Personal growth was reported to be one of the key outcomes from this research and Wilkins (2000b) described this as 'developmental' research in that the main outcome was the personal growth of those involved. Our anxieties about this transitional time, how they manifested themselves and aspects of our lives which were of support during these transitions, such as the maintenance of Christmas rituals, led to findings which are not only relevant to the co-researchers' experiences but which could be informative in developing academic understanding of an important life stage.

## Chapter 3 – Literature Review

As this study is about my own understanding of the research process this literature is data as well as a means of situating my research. In this literature review I establish a field to which my research contributes and provide an account of the theory that helps me explain the processes I identify as a result of my research. I also provide academic precedence and support for the ideas presented in the previous chapter. In part my thesis offers an explanation as to why subjective and collaborative approaches are effective as a means of inquiry through my focus on personal growth as a research process.

My interest in, and my understanding of, the research process has been heavily influenced by ideas researched and expressed by others. This influence began by my reading generally around subjective, collaborative and creative research methods to build on the understanding of research approaches I had become familiar with as part of my undergraduate degree and during the MPhil stage of this research. Influential approaches were heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990) co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986), and the person centred approach (Rogers, 1957; Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002 see appendix 3) along with other ‘new paradigm’ approaches (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Rather than standing on the shoulders of these giants, I cowered behind them occasionally

whispering an idea, hoping it wouldn't be heard for the fear it may be shot down as ridiculous or obvious.

Qualitative research is distinct from quantitative research in the social sciences in terms of what is researched and therefore how it is researched. Sanders and Wilkins (2010) make a distinction between research as a process of 'measuring things' and 'collecting stories'. Epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowing and ontological assumptions about the nature the known guide the approach a researcher takes. The quantitative paradigm assumes a fixed reality that can be tested, whereas the qualitative paradigm seeks to uncover experiences and meanings where an interpreted reality is assumed. There have been a number of challenges to the positivistic (quantitative) approach to social science research centring round the inappropriateness of a natural sciences approach to researching human experience. These include criticisms of positivism due to:

- The emphasis on justification rather than discovery;
- The axiological assumption that theory can be value free;
- The reductionist nature of positivistic research and theory;
- The ignorance of humanness.

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

The qualitative paradigm (in social science) is concerned with 'drawing out the salient features of an experience rather than attempting to measure it' (Sanders and Wilkins, 2010: 117). Within qualitative research there is a diversity in method which ranges from structured interviews, through to thematic analysis (Boyatzis,

1998) and on to introspective approaches which advocate the use of the researcher as the researched in a self-focused (although other related as discussed in chapter 6) study. The former end of this range is more situated within positivistic ways of thinking where the researcher seeks to do research on ‘subjects’ and endeavours not to muddy the waters with their own bias. The latter end of the spectrum as defined above is the approach to research that is relevant to this study.

Reason and Hawkins (1988) suggest that research can be to explain or to express, to analyse or to understand. This gives a context in which a researcher can make choices about the appropriateness of a method given the aims of the research.

Sanders and Wilkins (2010: 3) further outline five possible outcomes of research as being: *informative; transformative; developmental; explanatory; and expressive*.

They go on (2010: 4) to highlight that in classical Greece a distinction was made between *logos* as a logical, rational way of thinking and *mythos* as being about meaning often through poetic or creative representation; so the recognition of different, but equally valuable forms of knowing, is nothing new. Likewise in hermeneutic philosophy a difference between *Geisteswissenschaften* as the human or social science and *Naturwissenschaften* as the natural science is highlighted in that, ‘science may “explain” nature but we can only “understand” human beings’ (Woolfolk et al, 1988: 8). This introduces the important consideration that there is not one way of knowing and that the current dominant acceptance of what constitutes research is applicable to one, privileged way of knowing.

For me, a simple distinction between ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ is helpful as this defines research as a search for knowledge in the sense of reliable and provable outcomes as distinct from research as developing understanding where the outcome

is a trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLeod, 2003; Nutt Williams & Morrow, 2009; Sanders and Wilkins, 2010) account.

Schwandt (1999) addresses the issue of understanding and early on in my study I felt this was an important consideration. He explores how we conceptualise understanding and how the various dimensions of understanding differ from knowledge. Schwandt (1999) suggests that we are always trying to understand meaning; the meaning of what we say and do, and the meaning of our everyday lives. He further states that he believes the 'current controversy' in qualitative inquiry stems from the fact that, "because qualitative inquiry largely sees itself as a social science, it cannot let go of this empiricist quest for knowledge as getting to the bottom of things" (pg. 453).

In feminist methodology this, what Barone (1997: 222) refers to as a 'methodological straightjacket', is framed as the 'cognitive authority' (Pyne Addelson, 1991: 16) of science. Privileging science is privileging the concept that there is one reality and therefore one truth and this authority of the scientific specialist (*ibid*) is a representation of what Cook and Fonow (1986) refer to as patriarchal academic and research structures. More feminine ways of researching involve being personally and emotionally involved in the conduct of inquiry (Fonow, 1991: 9).

The justification of subjectivity in research and the contribution of ideas on how to incorporate this in method have been debated over a number of years. Eisner (2005: 120) makes clear the initial case for subjectivity in his objection to,



the view that a scientifically acceptable research method is ‘objective’ or ‘value free’, that it harbours no particular point of view. All methods and all forms of representation are partial.

In reaction to the perceived impossibility of objectivity and to the feeling that the pursuit of objectivity does not allow for feeling to be conveyed (Langer, 1942 cited in Eisner, 1991: 4) researchers have sought an approach that does not miss out on some of the more particular complexities of human experience. Equally qualitative researchers have concluded, as Heron (1996: 200) writes,

You can’t inquire into the human condition from outside it, except by committing suicide. You can only inquire into it from inside it.

This requires a subjective approach; one that is from the researcher’s own perspective. If research is subjective there needs to be recognition that it is subjective, by both the researcher(s) and the people who engage with the research.

In recognition of the unavoidable bias in research the use of *reflexivity* has become a key feature in qualitative inquiry. Macbeth (2001: 35) explains,

Reflexivity is a deconstruction exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text and world, and for penetrating the representational act itself.

Further to this the reflexive approach has allowed a new richness in inquiry through the researcher’s examination of those experiences and influences that lead to a perspective from which they enter the research. Of these approaches Reed-Danahay in 1997 writes of this turn in ethnography,

One emergent ethnographic writing practice involves highly personalised account where authors draw on their own experiences to extend

understanding of a discipline or culture. Such evocative writing practices have been labelled 'autoethnography'

A recognition of the subjective, and a value for the subjective, has been established as a reflexive discipline which allows for a rigorous process of reflection on researcher position. Beyond this, or rather akin to it, is the notion of introspective process in researching subjective (i.e. the researcher's) experience.

Moustakas (1990: 11) writes of heuristic research,

From the beginning and throughout an investigation, heuristic research involves self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery; the research question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration. When I consider an issue, problem, or question, I enter into it fully. I focus on it with unwavering attention and interest. I search introspectively, meditatively, and reflexively into its nature and possible meanings. With full and unqualified interest, I am determined to extend my understanding and knowledge of an experience. I begin the heuristic investigation with my own self-awareness and explicate that awareness with reference to a question or problem until an essential insight is achieved, one that will throw a beginning light onto critical human experience.

A possible criticism to be levied at subjective and introspective studies, even if reflexive, is that they are only relevant to the individual conducting them. This leads to the question of how outcomes from such research are useful. Although not generalizable in the orthodox sense, it does not mean one person's experience or interpretation is not useful as a way of generating understanding for a wider community of researchers or interested parties.

Moustakas (1990: 15) holds the view that "with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social - and perhaps universal - significance". This may seem like a brave claim but it depends, again, on the nature of research; if an

outcome needs to be reliably applicable to an equivalent person or situation then the subjective is not generalizable but if the intention is to convey meaning that resonates with others then it can be of social or universal significance.

Even empirical theory generated with the intention of applying to the general cannot reliably be applied to the individual. Lincoln and Guba (2000: 106) use the analogy that,

The fact, say, that 80% of individuals presenting given symptoms have lung cancer is at best incomplete evidence that a particular patient presenting with such symptoms has lung cancer.

Eisner (1997: 270) suggests,

We all generalize from N's of one and make adjustments that seem appropriate in the process. To do this we think analogically and metaphorically, and settle for plausibility.

This recognition that we are able to think beyond the literal in making judgements is echoed in the hermeneutic concept of communicative rationality (Habermas, 1981), where it is explained that people will make judgements on the same situation by comparing it to what they already know, thus rationalising the message or event.

Love (1994) describes the hermeneutic circle as demonstrative of the ways in which people in conversation, or readers when reading a text, will mutually transform ideas. The hermeneutic circle first related to the bible and to the reading of ancient texts. The idea behind the hermeneutic circle is that we understand in relation to what was learnt, or understood before. Thus pre-understanding or prejudice is always present. Gadamer (1979: 9) writes, "Prejudices, in the literal sense of the

word, constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience”. One element of the hermeneutic circle is how we understand the parts of a text in terms of the whole message. It is the moving from the naïve understanding based on pre-conceptions to a deepened understanding through a process of interpretation which characterises the movement between part and whole (or whole and part) in the hermeneutic circle (Palmer, 1969).

Hermeneutics can be used in understanding human behaviour (Meichenbaum 1988: 117-118). In interpreting human action we must consider how the same action can have different meanings for different people. Equally, we should be aware of the way our own interpretation changes what we understand (Meichenbaum 1988: 118). This points to the need for an openly subjective and reflexive research paradigm. If, however, as individuals, we all make different interpretations and meanings what are the ramifications for research? How can we understand another person’s behaviour and experience? The answer offered by Gadamer is that our understanding is not based on understanding the message as intended but that the message itself contains the meaning which is interpreted and so “understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive attitude as well” (Gadamer, 1984, cited in Sass, 1988: 251)

Hermeneutic philosophy offers theory on understanding which is integral to the research process I explain throughout this thesis. The focus on interpretation allows for an exploration of the relationship between the interpretation and the interpreter where, ‘interpretation is the hinge between language and lived experience’ (Ricoeur, 1994 cited in Geanellos, 2000: 113). The language we have available

shapes understanding as it is how we make sense of things. Our language is also shared.

The hermeneutic principle of interpretation points to the idea of understanding as intersubjective. Ricoeur (1974: 17) asserts, ‘every hermeneutics is thus explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others’. This points to the corollary that self-understanding means understanding others. In these terms it is necessary to incorporate both understanding of self and other in human inquiry. In discussing understanding Schwandt (1999) covers many points, but one which is of most interest to me is his interpretation of understanding as relational. He points out that we share language and that meaning is not subjective but *intersubjective* (pg. 453). Therefore our understanding must be related to those around us.

Schwandt (pg. 457) quotes Gergen (1988: 47),

Understanding is not contained within me, or within you, but in that which we generate together in our form of relatedness.

So the meaning is more than co-understood, it is co-created.

If taking a hermeneutic position on the nature of understanding an approach to research it seems that there is a case for doing both research *with* other people and doing research that is focused on self-understanding. There are established methods which offer ways of approaching research for each of these two factors.

One way in which we make sense of the world is through stories (Rennie, 1994).

This is both a process of telling stories and hearing stories. Reason and Hawkins (1988) talk about storytelling as research, Wilkins (2000a) offers storybuilding as a method of inquiry, Vickers (2002) writes about researchers as storytellers and

Lewis (2011) suggests that research *is* storytelling. Implicit in all of these approaches is the notion that there is a process of meaning making through the construction of the story and a way of understanding from story.

Feldman (1999) highlights the role of conversation in action research referring to the work of Cochran-Smith and Lyte (1993) who wrote of building on one another's insights through conversation as a process of analysis and interpretation, the result being that practice was improved; Hollingworth (1994) who discussed the collaborative conversation as being transformative and developing 'relational knowledge' through sharing experiences, reflecting on them and tying them to political and social structures of the situations of the co-researchers; and his own work in action research groups that reflected a similar process.

Action research is a way of researching within organisations, communities or institutions which involves working *with* people who live and work in these spaces and also working *for* them in that the outcome is practical as there is transformation in the lives or work of the participants (Stringer, 1996, also see Stringer 2007; Koshy, Koshy & Waterman, 2011; Baumfield et al, 2008; Reason and Bradbury, 2008)

Co-operative experiential inquiry offers another framework for a mutual approach. The main philosophy of co-operative inquiry is that we can research with one another as equal *co-researchers*. Experience can be discussed and shared within the group making multiple perceptions available, which can increase the level of understanding of phenomena. People are seen as active agents and research should be 'rooted in' and 'derived from' their experience (Reason and Heron, 1986: 458).

Reason and Heron's 1986 paper outlines the method of co-operative inquiry. Three types of knowledge are explained as integral to the process: *experiential knowledge*, *practical knowledge* and *propositional knowledge*. They later add a fourth: *presentational knowledge* (Heron, 1996: 53). Heron (1996: 57) represents these four ways of knowing in a pyramid that shows the progression, possible through co-operative experiential inquiry; from experiential knowledge to practical knowledge, which Heron (1996: 34) regards as the fulfilment of the knowledge quest. The diagram and definitions are shown below.

**Practical Knowledge:**

how to do something, how to practice relevant skills to aid transformation.

**Presentational Knowledge:**

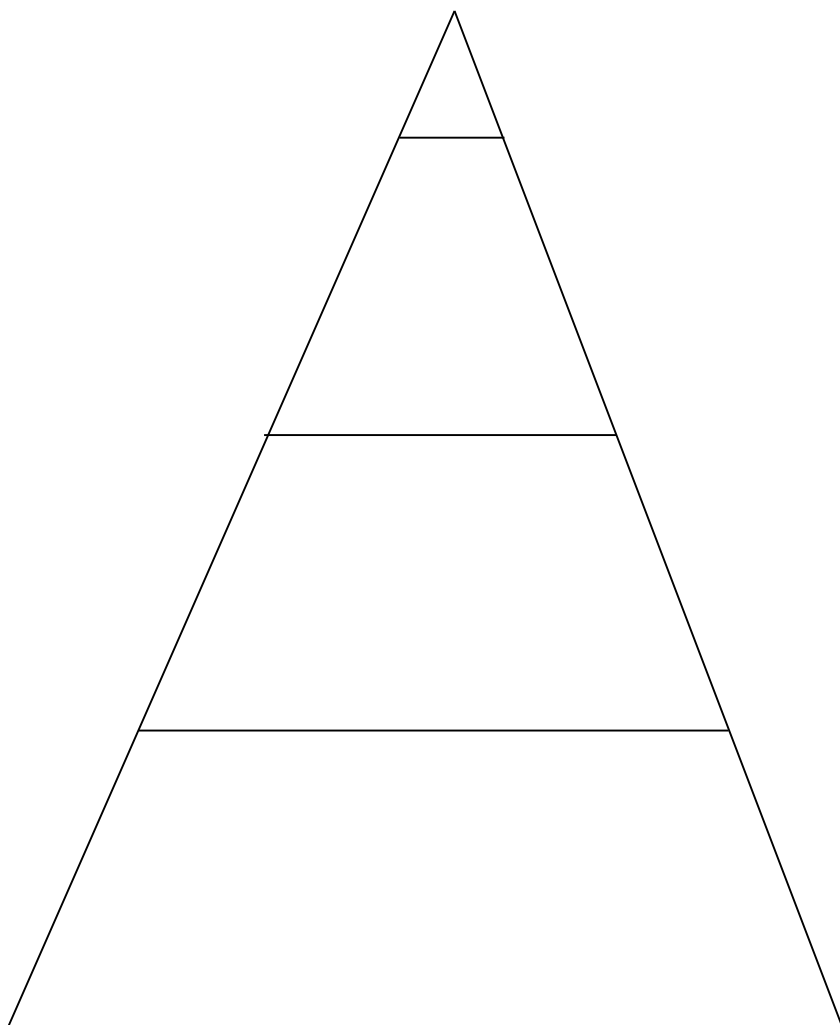
expressing significant patterns of form and process.

**Propositional Knowledge:**

conceptualising or theorising, presented in theories and statements.

**Experiential Knowledge:**

direct encounters, feeling of presence and perceptual imaging.



The group moves through these phases of knowledge in a cycle of action and reflection; each time clarifying, refining and deepening the theories to create greater practical knowledge. Co-operative experiential inquiry is related to action research (as explained by Reason, 1994) therefore co-operative experiential inquiry is most used in institutions, businesses and social movements where a practical outcome enhances individual and team performance in that setting. This does not mean the research does not have a wider significance; it can still be informative to others which is referred to as third person action research, (see Reason and Bradbury, 2008). McArdle's (2004, unpublished thesis) co-operative inquiry with young women managers, for example, illustrates the way the young women managers perceive there to be a certain type of woman who is successful within the workplace which is not congruent with the way they see themselves. This, although specifically relevant to the organisation within which the research takes place, is more generally informative in illustrating feelings in women managers that success is attached to abandoning family and personal life.

The Co-operative experiential approach is also useful for incorporating the perspectives of different groups of individuals on the same event. For example Tee's (2005, unpublished thesis) study where he conducts a co-operative inquiry involving the collaboration of both mental health service users and student nurses in exploring the sharing of clinical decision making about the service user's care.

Heron (1996: 103) suggests that research can be informative or transformative. In the first co-operative research group I was a part of we concluded that research could also be developmental (see Wilkins, 2000b: 21). This recognises that there is an individual outcome to a study involving constructive personal change or growth



and so highlights the significance of an individual introspective process that is a part of the group process.

One way of researching through introspective process is by using heuristic research. Heuristic research is a way of discovering, learning and constructing knowledge through reflecting on personal experience. Moustakas developed this approach through his study of loneliness (1961) when his interest in the subject was aroused through witnessing the loneliness of hospitalised children. Having decided to investigate loneliness he immersed himself fully in the subject, looking at the loneliness of those around him and his own lonely experiences. Deep immersion and personal reflection is one of the main characteristics of heuristic research.

Moustakas (1990: 15-26) explains the heuristic concepts and processes:

***Identifying with the focus of inquiry*** is the process of ‘getting inside the question’, to understand something from another perspective and identify with the focus of the investigation.

***Self-Dialogue*** is talking to yourself but with a purpose. Self-dialogue can take many forms; perhaps an internal debate, questions and answers about your own experience, or there may be a deliberate use of a devil’s advocate role. What is important is that self-dialogue involves a deep level of personal honesty and a willingness to confront personal experience and its relevance to the focus of the study.

***Tacit Knowing*** is the knowing we have of the whole of a phenomenon from an understanding of the elements it comprises. Often this contributes to a sense of

knowing more than we think we can know. Moustakas (1990: 21) uses the metaphor of a tree to explain this:

Knowledge of the trunk, branches, buds, leaves, colors, textures, sounds, shape, size – and other parts or qualities – ultimately may enable a sense of the treeness of a tree, and its wholeness as well. This knowing of the essence or treeness of a tree is achieved through a tacit process.

Moustakas draws on the work of Polanyi (1964, 1969) who describes four types of tacit knowledge including *subsidiary* – those elements of perception of which we are consciously aware and *focal* – being the elements of experience that are unseen and invisible (but that may be uncovered through a process of inquiry). Douglas and Moustakas (1985: 49) describe tacit knowing as giving ‘birth to the hunches and vague, formless insights that characterise heuristic discovery.’

***Intuition*** is the bridge between ‘the implicit knowledge in the tacit and the explicit knowledge which is observable and describable’ (Moustakas, 1990: 23). It is through intuition that patterns can be grasped, relationships can be recognised, and inferences drawn. Moustakas relates this to the tree metaphor:

Intuition makes possible the perceiving of things as wholes. For example, one can view a tree from many angles, sides, front, and back; but one cannot see the whole tree. The whole tree must be intuited from the clues that are provided by careful observation, experience, and connecting the parts and subtleties of the tree into patterns and relationships that ultimately enable an intuitive knowing of the tree as a whole.

***Indwelling*** is the process of turning inward to increase the understanding of the phenomenon in question,

It involves a willingness to gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some facet of human experience in order to understand its constituent qualities and wholeness. To understand something fully, one dwells inside the subsidiary and focal factors to draw from them every possible nuance, texture, fact, and meaning. The indwelling process is conscious and deliberate, yet it is not lineal or logical. It follows clues wherever they appear; one dwells inside them and expands their meanings and associations until a fundamental insight is achieved.

Moustakas (1990: 24)

***Focusing*** is a term originally taken from Gendlin (1978) and involves the clearing of an ‘inward space to enable one to tap into thoughts and feelings’. This facilitates a relaxed and receptive state which allows for the clarification of perceptions and a focus on the essence of what matters, setting aside peripheral qualities and feelings.

***The Internal Frame of Reference*** borrows the notion of the ‘Frame of Reference’ from the Person Centred Approach (Rogers, 1957) which refers to the lens through which a person sees and experiences the world. Inherent in heuristic research is the validity of the internal frame of reference of the person ‘who has had, is having, or will have’ the relevant experience. Moustakas (1990: 26) writes:

If one is to know and understand another’s experience, one must converse directly with the person. One must encourage the other to express, explore, and explicate the meanings that are within his or her experience. One must create an atmosphere of openness and trust, and a connection with the other that will inspire that person to share his or her experience in unqualified, free, and unrestrained disclosures.

Moustakas (1990:27-32) describes six phases of heuristic research:

1. **Initial Engagement:** the researcher(s) become intensely interested in a phenomenon
2. **Immersion:** The researcher becomes deeply involved in the topic, it is apparent in all aspects of life.
3. **Incubation:** The process of withdrawing from the research and allowing the ideas to 'brew' or 'simmer'.
4. **Illumination:** A breakthrough of new insight. Moustakas compares this to Archimedes' exclamation of 'eureka' on recognising the displacement of water when he stepped into the bath.
5. **Explication:** Making the findings explicit, examining them to create a picture of the experience as a whole. This is often presented through a 'creative synthesis' (a story, poem, picture or song).

Heuristic research as a method has been somewhat overlooked in terms of dominant reflexive methods. However, one area where it has been applied is in research in counselling and psychotherapy (for example, Nutall, 2006; Stephenson & Loewenthal, 2006; West, 2001). This shows the relevance of the method for researchers who have the ability and the desire to reflect on their own experiences and practice, and it is applicable to study that is an on-going process running alongside, for example, daily practice in a given profession. Heuristic research allows for the exploration of multiple realities and mirrors the similar assumption in psychotherapeutic practice which makes it a useful approach (Nutall, 2006).

Autoethnography, is also a research method which is self-focused. Ellis & Bochner (2000: 739) explain,

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural

Reed-Danahay (1997) discusses how researchers may differ in the emphasis they place on *auto* (self) *ethnos* (culture) or *graphy* (the research and writing process). In this sense autoethnography has become a term for describing a broad range of studies of a personal nature (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to the extent that Ellis & Bochner (2000) and Wall (2006) refer to heuristic research as an autoethnographic method.

Autoethnography incorporates the representation of research into the ‘doing’ of research with the inclusion of evocative writing as both a way of representing findings and a method of inquiry. Richardson (1994) further develops this in talking about writing as a method of inquiry, rather than just a ‘mopping up’ activity at the end of research. This involves writing in different ways as a process of discovery.

Evocative writing touches us where we live, in our bodies. Through it we can experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation. Trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences and so on; we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties.

(Richardson, 1994: 931)

Although this evocative writing can be set within an academic discussion in a layered approach (see Ellis and Bochner 2000), the evocative form can be a useful approach to sharing understanding as it stands.

Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author's world, evoked into a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives."

(Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 742)

There are criticisms of this evocative and self-focused writing, or rather cautions given to prospective researchers. Speedy (2005: 63) on writing as inquiry cautions, 'It leaves much unsaid, uncertain and incomplete. It is, at best, a balancing act between form and content'. Atkinson (2006: 403) also warns that,

the ethnographer becomes more memorable than the ethnography... the problem stems from a tendency to promote ethnographic research on writing on the basis of its experiential value, its evocative qualities, and its personal commitments rather than its scholarly purpose, its theoretical basis, and its disciplinary contributions

In considering the criteria autoethnographers set for themselves, Bochner (2000:267) argues,

Traditionally we have worried much more about how we are judged as "scientists" by other scientists rather than about whether our work is useful, insightful, or meaningful – and to whom. We get pre-occupied with rigour but neglectful of imagination. We hold on to the illusion that we will unanimously agree on the culture-free standards to which all evidence must appeal, so that we won't have to rely on our own "subjectivity" to decide.

If arguing subjective research should be openly subjective to mediate against possible misrepresentations of generalizability, then the only way to view the

evaluation of research is as a subjective process as the above quote suggests. Moustakas (1990) additionally holds that it is the researcher themselves who should make this judgement. This still leaves questions, however, about against what criteria it should be assessed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the notion of 'trustworthiness' as a more relevant way of evaluating post-modern research, or rather endeavouring to produce credible findings and interpretations. Nutt Williams and Morrow (2009) in synthesising approaches to achieving trustworthiness identify three major categories to be taken into account which I interpret below:

- Firstly the integrity of the data in terms of the adequacy and dependability. This includes the quality and quantity of the data, not so much in terms of a greater N number being preferable but in the richness that the data offers. Redundancy of data is suggested as signifying sufficiency which is when no radically new insights are achieved through more data collection or analysis. Integrity of the data is also established through evidence of the interpretations of the research fitting the data, for example through the use of quotes.
- Secondly is the balance between subjectivity and reflexivity. This allows a balance, or illustrates a balance between participant meaning and researcher interpretation. Moustakas (1990) and Sanders and Wilkins (2010) suggest a process of checking understanding with co-researchers by asking, 'is this what you told me?' or 'do you see your experience accurately represented here'. Nutt Williams and Morrow also recommend the use of a team of researchers and/or an external peer

to check the relation between the data and the researcher interpretation, referred to as peer-debriefing by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

- The third criteria is the clear communication of findings. Findings should be easily understood by the reader and supported by participant quotes; they should answer the initial research questions; illustrate the meanings of participants including the context of the situation or behaviour (my interpretation being that Nutt Williams and Morrow are referring in part to the establishment of the wider story of the experience) and that findings should be related to current theory and practice in the literature. Further to this the authors include the necessity for clarity in the language used to communicate findings, the collaboration with participants and a focus on how participants can understand the research findings along with the contribution it makes to practice and/or theory referring to this as social validity; which seems to address both the accessibility of the communication of findings and the usefulness of them.

Wilkins (2010) writes that qualitative research which is trustworthy provides a deeper understanding of human experience. He explains the philosophical position of a person centred approach to research would assume,

that *meaning* is socially constructed and that 'truth' is subjective and therefore variable depending on your point of view. (Even some research physicists now take this line). The purpose is to seek an understanding of the context of truths, to discover meaning, to explore experience and even to construct new meaning, new understanding and to effect social and/or political change. Person-centred research provides a way to contextualise the 'truth'. Only by understanding the context can we understand the view



point of the actors in the context which generated the view of truth and so come to some tentative explanation. (pg. 222-223)

Authenticity is another way to consider the validity of subjective research. Guba and Lincoln added this as a 'criteria of fairness' in 1989. Rowan (1981) uses the term authenticity to denote a personal commitment and refers to the researcher not hiding behind roles and the participants not being forced into fixed roles which points to a genuineness both in the 'doing' of the research and in the reporting of it.

Hutterer (1990) writes of Roger's concept of 'authentic science' that it means researchers are involved as subjective human beings and subjects as respected partners whose interests and interpretations are included as part of the research process. Authenticity also relates to the second category of trustworthiness outlined above in that it points to the realness of the portrayal of the experience. In hermeneutic inquiry Weber and Dilthey highlight the fundamental criteria of 'verstehen' meaning a sense of understanding achieved and represented through authentic and credible representations (McLeod, 2003) and it is this sense of understanding that I feel is necessary but that needs to be authentic in that it 'rings true' as a representation of experience.

Heron (1996: 163), in discussing the issue of validity in co-operative inquiry, makes clear the importance of 'truth as the congruent articulation of reality' where articulation is the 'revealing and shaping, of finding meaning in and giving meaning to' the reality being investigated. So valid knowledge is the true (in the sense that it articulates reality) expression of experiential knowing as genuine encounter,

presentational knowing should be true to heartfelt experience and practical knowing should be true to the principles of the individual.

Heron (1996) gives procedures for avoiding uncritical subjectivity as a way of enhancing validity (meaning sound, well-grounded and well-founded research as opposed to positivistic definitions). These include: cycles of action and reflection which refine knowing; researchers converging or diverging on whole or different parts of the inquiry; the adoption of a devil's advocate role to question the assumptions made and the inquiry method and process; allowing chaos and order to convert to new order in their own time and ensuring authentic collaboration (the full and authentic engagement) of all co-researchers.

The representation of the outcome may differ depending on the nature of the outcome. Heron (1996: 101) suggests, regarding the outcome of co-operative inquiry, that 'anything written down is secondary and subsidiary' to the changes within people. Heron writes regarding the transformation or process of change for co-researchers. I (Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004, appendix 1) have written about personal growth as an outcome of, and a tool for subjective and collaborative research and in reflecting on the same research group Wilkins (2000b) explored the notion of a developmental outcome. Perhaps these more personal outcomes require a more personal approach to dissemination.

Leavy (2012) goes beyond self-focused writing in suggesting fiction can be a form of representation and that a novel can convey experience. She points to the presence of fact in fiction and the way research (she gives the example of her

interviews with women) can inform fictional writing. Poetry has an established place as a form of representation, with researchers situating poems within academic discussion (Lahman et al, 2011). Creativity as a process can be used for inquiry, for example Douglas (2012) talks of the use of poetry and song writing. Reason and Hawkins (1988: 81-82) write,

Creative expression is often relegated to the production of the beautiful or the entertaining. We see it also as a mode of inquiry, a form of meaning-making, and a way of knowing. So what is needed is a methodology of meaning-making as part of human inquiry.

Researchers coming from a creative field, for example art therapy or dance movement therapy often recognise the uses of creativity in research. Cancienne and Snowber (2003: 237-253) discuss the use of a combination of movement and writing in research, pointing to the way in which dance can be an act of discovery (2003: 237). Meekums (1993: 130-137) writes about research as an act of creation and Rogers, N highlights this quality:

The expressive arts process has two aspects: it is a process of inner exploration, and it is also a language. The first aspect allows people to discover feelings and thoughts. The second allows them to communicate those feelings and thoughts. (2000: 132)

Creative expression allows for the communication of understanding that is difficult to put into words, “Art is a direct visceral experience. It does not need to go through the word mill” (N. Rogers, 2000: 69). This aids a research process where the aim is to access the felt sense and tacit knowledge as discussed by Moustakas (1990).

With a model of the person as self-determining and autonomous and as Mearns and Thorne (1988: 16) write 'motivated to seek truth' there are similarities in the person centred approach (Rogers, 1957; 1961) and the research approaches I have introduced here. In fact O'Hara (2000) asserts that person-centred therapy *is* heuristic research. Wood (1996: 163) states, the person-centred approach is a "psychological posture, a way of being, from which one confronts a situation." This way of being can also be applied to research.

Broadly, person-centred research focuses on the individual as an experiencing agent. People's subjective experience should be valued and power should be shared with everybody involved; the study should not be under the strict direction of the researcher. People involved should be congruent, empathic, and accepting of other people and their experiences, to truly try to understand them. There should also be a relationship between participants. A relationship within research, and the utilisation of the core conditions in this relationship, can enhance the research by making those involved disclose more, and even discover more about themselves as a part of the process (Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002, appendix 3).

Much of what could be considered Person Centred Research is drawing on Heuristic Research (e.g. Atkins & Loewenthal, 2004) or Collaborative Inquiry, for example Morris, (2007) Turner, (2007) & Rolfe (2007), which are three papers from the same therapist/client/researcher study where the relationship is discussed from the therapist, client and researcher perspective. Wilkins (2010) in discussing

researching in a person centred way points to such studies as illustrative of person centred research which he characterises as valuing personal experience with respect for the people involved. Where research is explicitly intended to be person centred there is an emphasis on collaboration, holism, openness to the total experience of all concerned and an approach that is permissive and elective.

In action research, co-operative inquiry and person centred research there is a focus on a democratisation of the research process where those studied are also involved in the conducting of the research. This emphasises the idea of research not being done *on* people. It does, however, raise questions about the organisation of research and the roles involved as there will, in most cases, be an initiating or primary researcher. In Mitchell-Williams et al (2004, appendix 1) and Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams (2002, appendix 3) we refer to collaborative power (Natiello, 1990) which is a power distinct from personal power or authoritarian power in that it is based on a caring about others' needs in addition to one's own. The view of power is not related to dominants and subordinates but interrelatedness and interdependence. Key elements of the relationship are openness, responsiveness, dignity, personal empowerment, alternating influence and cooperation rather than competition.

Some of the approaches I discuss offer a way of working with people collaboratively, some privilege an introspective process. The way philosophical hermeneutics relates to the relevant research approaches as a way of understanding the creation of meaning is useful in developing an understanding of intersubjective research process. Creativity and mutual storytelling or conversational research give a way in which to explore this intersubjectivity. According to Freeman (2011: 454)

“The hermeneutic problem asks how interpretive beings make sense of finding themselves situated in an already interpreted world”. This seems like a challenge to delve into and try to discover that which we already know.

In the following chapter I introduce the interim model which represents my understanding of inquiry as a result of my engagement with and experience of the research approaches discussed in this literature review. This represents a synthesis of some of these approaches and provides a framework through which I research the inquiry process further in establishing an approach which builds on the ideas expressed here and adds the recognition of personal growth and the processes by which it can be transformed into informative outcomes.

I have developed confidence and faith in my own thinking, in the realisation that there is a new research challenge I can address through this research. I feel I can contribute to approaches to research in addressing a need to provide the bridge between lived experience and academic endeavour; to allow others to apply their own reflexive abilities within a research framework. The challenge is to not encourage the creation of ‘watered down art forms’ (Richardson, 2000: 251), to not overstate the novelty of intersubjective and reflexive inquiry (Atkinson, 2006) but to create a useable model allowing for the democratisation of the research process and the ability to work *with* people through groupwork and conversation, which is person centred and growth promoting. This should be a framework enabling the explanation of personal or professional reflexive learning as a research process and

facilitating the explication of what is already known as a *re-search* process that deepens understanding.

I have finally found the confidence to come out from my cowering position behind those giants and tentatively begin to climb up to take my place on their shoulders.

## Life Stages: Literature guiding our approach

We were guided by the approach of co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986) which we used as a framework for our research. Our intention was that the research would be done ‘*with*’ and ‘*for*’ one another as we sought a democratic approach where we had equal influence on the method and the content of the research. We deliberately made formal propositions and ‘returns to propositional knowing’ in the light of the new insights gained through the research. We also recognised the devil’s advocate role (Heron, 1988) in our process. Each of us would at times question our approach or our assumptions and families, friends and the audience of a presentation we gave to members of the university department would provide alternative perspectives. We embraced the notion of progressing through experiential, propositional, presentational and practical knowing. We added the notion of ‘pre-propositional knowing’ and concluded that research could have a developmental outcome as well as a transformative or informative outcome (Wilkins, 2000b)

Heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990) also influenced our approach through the inclusion of conversational interviews, incubation (which allowed us to see periods where we felt we were not actively researching as a part of the process) and illumination (see chapter 6).

The person-centred approach characterised our way of interacting and as such was part of our method as this created the climate which facilitated our personal growth. This allowed for new insight which we were able to share with the group and therefore the research (see appendix 3).

Our familiarity with creative approaches to therapy (Rogers, N. 2000; Silverstone, 1993) having explored these as part of a larger group, became a natural way for us to explore and share our individual understanding.

Reason and Hawkins’ (1998) ‘*storytelling as research*’ and Wilkins’ (2000a) story-building model aided our understanding of how our stories and conversations could be a means of building understanding.



## Chapter 4 – The Interim Model

### Phase One →Phase Two

This chapter represents the moment in my research where an illumination resulted in the conception of a way of researching that operates on three levels. The model is an outcome of this study, but one which I became aware of in the early stages of the research and which I have since developed (as discussed in chapter six). Following the creation of the model I was able to reflect on the pre-propositional knowing that had developed leading to this illumination as made clear in the following account.

The specific experiences and observations discussed in this chapter are part of the first phase of the research and represent the culmination of the development of the philosophies expressed in chapter two and the engagement with the literature as reviewed in chapter three.

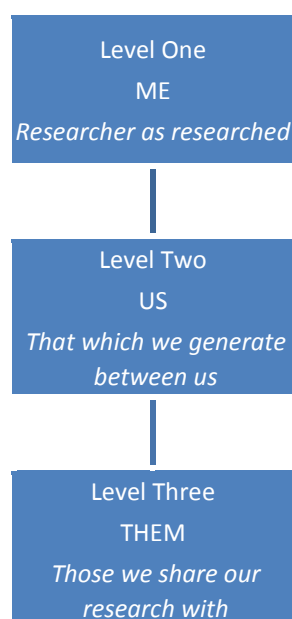
The model took its initial form as a result of the first phase of my research which I later (chapter 6) refer to as an outcome of pre-propositional knowing (Wilkins & Mitchell-Williams 2002, appendix 2 building on Reason & Heron's, 1986 'propositional knowing'). I developed the model at that point to synthesise some of the existing approaches to research that I felt complimented one another (as detailed in the previous chapter) and to provide form to some of my own propositions about aspects of introspective and collaborative processes (expressed in chapter 2) which I had identified as a result of my own experiences of introspective and collaborative research. My focus in the first stage of the study (then MPhil) was divided into three areas: subjective and introspective research; collaborative research; and how

we communicate findings to an audience. The understanding I developed from this phase of the research allowed me to form my initial model.

The model was the result of a creative process akin to that explained by Silverstone (1993: 131-32) which I outline below and I also see this as an illumination (Moustakas, 1990: 28). The link between creativity and illumination is discussed in chapter 6.

The model described here is the interim model in its initial form. Following the early conception of the model the remainder of my research was dedicated to deepening my understanding of the research process through using the model, so I was essentially using the model to research the model; this enabled the refining and extending of it.

### **The Model**



My research experiences were based on my undergraduate dissertation which was an introspective heuristic study and my experience in a group conducting co-operative experiential inquiry which is collaborative. It is clear to see that this model represents those two forms of research in level one and level two. My interest in the communication of research outcomes is represented as level three.

#### Level One – Me

Level one is the level of personal or subjective understanding: how ‘I’, the individual understands something. Level one is the process of understanding from one’s own perspective, whether this is personal experience or the experience of others. Research that is introspective is a level one process. It is about self-focused understanding through a reflexive process. On creating the three levels of inquiry, level one was based on my experience of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990).

#### Level Two – Us

Level two represents understanding generated between people. Initially I saw this as co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986) and other approaches to researching with others. I was particularly interested in conversation as a research process.

#### Level Three – Them

Level three is the communication of research findings; it is the way we convey our understanding to ‘them’ (the audience). When the interim model was formed the focus was on how to represent findings but my exploration of level three became about the communication of the understanding resulting from research as a process.

### **The Development of Level One (introspective and subjective research)**

My experience of subjective and introspective research through this study, the experience of undergraduate students through their conversations with me and their submitted dissertations and the published literature as discussed in chapter 3 informed my understanding of subjective and introspective research. My ‘method’ was based on absorbing these experiences and reflecting on them in building a developed understanding. I would read studies as an immersive process where I attempted to engage fully in the author’s story, I would then read allow myself to reflect on the way in which I engaged with the story, for example picking up on the way my interest or my understanding was influenced by my own experiences. I would take quotes that I found interesting or illustrative (see appendix 4). In some ways this could be seen as an extraction of ‘themes’ despite my claim in chapter 2 that this was something I wanted to avoid. This was not necessarily about removing quotation from the wider context of the story but using quotation that exemplified the story. This was a process of understanding as much as illustration. I would also make notes that did not necessarily relate directly to the account I was reading but which were points that were, nevertheless, inspired by it; thus the reading was developing my understanding beyond the way it more literally informed me.

### **The Development of Level Two**

Up to the point of creating the model I had been involved in two collaborative research groups. These groups involved students electing to join the group as part of the final year of their undergraduate degree. The group met for two hours weekly for

the duration of the academic year. We inquired using conversation and creative methods as discussed in chapter 6. We allowed a focus for our research to emerge from our time together. This was not intentional in the first group but it became a process which was offered and intentionally adopted in subsequent groups. The first group researched ‘life stages’ and the second researched ‘connectedness’.

### **Creating the Model: The illumination**

I created my initial vision of the model in the very early stages of the PhD research. This initial model was the product of an ‘illumination’ (Moustakas, 1990: 28) which occurred while I was experimenting with form and colour in trying to sketch out some of my ideas about research. This was a creative process akin to that explained by Silverstone (1993: 131-132) in relation to art therapy:

- The image manifests itself within the person;
- The person externalises the image through paint or clay;
- There is a dialogue with the therapist so the meaning may become known on a conscious level;
- It may become necessary to work on the revealed meaning.

In the case of the initial model I was using blue chalk, the blue colour seeming important at the time, and I drew an oval. Below this I drew another oval. I drew some arcs connecting the two and then drew a third oval at the bottom. This seemed to illustrate some kind of process I had not identified explicitly before this time. It felt like a picturing of something I had felt but had not been able to explain. Referring to the above process outlined by Silverstone; the image had ‘manifested’ itself within me as a result of the engagement with the literature at the time, and my

research experiences up to that point. I externalised this image through my swirls of blue and purple chalk, and then I needed to work through what these ovals and arcs might mean. I thought about the focus of my research and the development of my interests coming out of the MPhil leg of my post graduate studies. I knew I wanted to create some synthesis, or way of working with both the subjective approaches such as heuristic research and the collaborative approach of co-operative experiential inquiry. Introspective process was important in my experience of both these approaches and so I wrote 'Me' in the first oval. Having worked in collaborative research groups I was interested in the way a group of people could generate understanding between them, so in the second oval I wrote 'Us – that which we generate between us', picking up on the words of Gergen (cited in Schwandt, 1999) Finally the third oval related to the communication of research to an audience; I labelled this oval, 'Them'.

In heuristic terms I had been immersed in the practical experience of subjective and collaborative research and the theoretical underpinnings during my undergraduate degree and the initial stages of this study. The illuminative, creative process had resulted in both a new internal search where I reflected on the relation between the separate areas of my study and it also represents explication, in that I gave form to my understanding, thus making it explicit.

**A reflection on the development of my understanding leading to the creation of the interim model: My Pre-Propositional Knowing**

Level One

On the conception of ‘level one’ of the model I was referring to research that is subjective and introspective. This is research that focuses on the experiences of the researcher and the reflexive process that deepens their understanding of the experience and how they have attributed meaning to it.

My understanding of level one began to develop as an undergraduate. During my first year at university I was introduced to a reflective way of working through a unit of study which involved encounter (Rogers, 1985). Various techniques were used from counselling, such as art therapy practices which I later became interested in as research tools. I found the processes of exploring my own experience to be rewarding and growth promoting as they allowed me to delve into who I was as a person.

By the final year of my undergraduate degree I had become familiar with research approaches that seemed to relate to the introspection I had found fulfilling. I found a great affinity with heuristic research as illustrated in chapter 2. I embarked on a study of ‘belonging’ out of my reaction to Moustakas’ ‘loneliness’ (1961). I conducted interviews with members of my group of friends; my rationale being that if I was going to research belonging I should do so with the people I felt I belonged with. These interviews were informal and I endeavoured to keep in mind the key person centred qualities of being congruent, empathic and accepting (Rogers, 1957). In facilitating my co-researchers exploration of their own experiences. I also held a

group meeting which drifted off the topic of the research fairly quickly. One co-researcher tried to re-focus the rest of the group but at that point I realised we were interacting the way we normally did and that this way of being was an example of our sense of belonging together. As this was a heuristic study I used the interviews to increase my own understanding of belonging, writing a poem as a creative synthesis and reflecting on other aspects of my feeling of belonging (a later reflection on this study is given in appendix 2 along with the original abstract).

When setting out on this (MPhil/PhD) study I was focused on the research process having found the experience of my undergraduate dissertation enlightening. I became interested in how other undergraduates were developing their own studies. Having elected to be a part of the collaborative research group again I developed a relationship with the members of that group, two of whom were conducting heuristic independent studies and one who was conducting an autoethnographic study. At that point I was not aware of autoethnography as a method but instantly recognised the kinship in the focus on subjective experience and reflexive processing. This, especially reflected in the completed dissertation, appeared even more self-focused and less rigorous than the approaches I was familiar with. With the heuristic researchers I discussed their progress and their experiences, realising their enthusiasm for the approach mirrored my own. I became a co-researcher in one of their studies and later worked with their completed dissertations to gain more understanding of their research experiences. They echoed the feelings of growth, enlightenment and immersion in their studies that I had found in mine. I found their reports to be engaging and thought provoking.



I was also developing my own research although at this stage I was concentrating on the literature and on my experiences in the research groups. Out of the literature I became interested in the process of reflexivity and this led me to my first articles on autoethnography (possibly Ellis and Bochner, 2000) here I recognised similar reflective processes but I did not at that time see any great relation to the approaches I was interested in.

### Level Two

Level two was clearly defined out of my experience in co-operative experiential inquiry groups. I had completed two of these (including my undergraduate experience) when I created the interim model. I was interested in the way we researched our experiences between us. We employed some of the creative approaches I had become familiar with as an undergraduate in exploring our experiences and conversation seemed to help develop our understanding from an individual to a collective meaning. Our being together and sharing something of ourselves with one another seemed to help us explore our own experiences and as the focus of the inquiries emerged out of our time together, perhaps the way in which the focus was relevant to all of us encouraged this process. We used heuristic concepts in explaining some of our processes and I began to see how the methods of co-operative inquiry and heuristic research could work together having merged them in my study of belonging as well as these research groups.

### Level Three

Level three was very much a separate level on the creation of this interim model. My interest was in *how* we could represent our findings from the collaborative

groups as the traditional research report did not seem appropriate given that our outcome was a collective understanding. I had also been drawn towards creative approaches to representation, I was primarily aware of poetry, for example in an article by Glesne (1997) but also more storied writing, for example Lewis (2001). I had the feeling that there was a way of representing research that came out of the processes of introspection and collaboration that I was interested in. I just could not find it.

### **How I understood the model at this time**

On the conception of the model I began to see how there was some kind of progression through all of these levels in both individual inquiry and group research. I had recognised in research groups that I went through my own personal research process within the group's search for understanding. This also seemed to be the case for other members of the groups, as one co-researcher reported,

It is as if in discovering new things about ourselves we could share that learning with the group.

This made me consider the ways in which the introspective process of heuristic research could work within a collaborative setting to deepen the quality of self-understanding which the co-researchers could share with the group. In the two research groups I had been a part of we had explicitly referred to heuristic concepts in explaining aspects of our process, for example considering times between our formal sessions as 'incubation'. It was apparent that co-researchers reflected on their own understanding as a result of reflecting on their experiences as part of the group. For example, in the connections research group there were distinct individual process of learning about what connectedness meant to each of us which

developed as the study progressed; reaching a group understanding came very late in the study.

Through telling stories and trying to externalise the felt sense of connectedness through artwork (see chapters 5 and 6) different group members identified their experience of connections as being about:

1. Ties to others that necessitate a relationship with them, be it positive or negative.
2. Bonds that represent a closeness.
3. Connectedness as a transpersonal process encompassing a felt sense or 'energy' where examples were given of meeting soul mates.

The different stories and understandings involved both positive and negative connotations of being connected to other human beings. Co-researchers reflected on their own experiences and the process through which they had developed the meaning they had attached to the notion of connection became clear. One member of the group seeing a connection as being a negative tie, discussed the way she was tied to family members who were responsible for damaging emotional experiences, but who she remained 'tied' to both practically in their remaining 'part' of the same family but also emotionally in the effect they had on her way of being in the world.

In the group researching connectedness there was a very obvious individual inquiry process for each member but one which ultimately fed into the group understanding. Equally within individual studies there is communication with others in drawing on their experience. I refer to heuristic research as level one inquiry but the understanding developed through this process involves the engagement with the experiences of others, for example through interviews.

As a result of the above considerations I recognised the scope for incorporating my learning from my experiences in research groups into more individual (or non-group based) research projects. Through my experiences of co-operative experiential inquiry I had become interested in the use of conversation in research as a way of replacing the practice of one person telling a story in, for example an interview; allowing the co-creation of understanding in which a primary researcher is able to share their understanding with the co-researcher (Clements et al, 1998 suggest the use of conversational interviews). At this point this was an informed (from my experiences in groups and my undergraduate dissertation where I incorporated a group meeting into the otherwise individual study, see appendix 2) but undeveloped proposition.

In this initial model level three represented the need to communicate research findings to an audience. I had been focusing on creative approaches to this having recognised the way in which creativity could convey the essence of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). I had considered representations through poetry (for example Glesne, 1997) and found this conveyed the required 'essence' but I found I wanted to know more about the process leading to the creation of these poems. Poetry is often used as a creative synthesis in heuristic research, although more so in dissertations and theses than published reports, however there are usually accompanying depictions that illustrate the actual stories of the co-researchers and these gave the explanation I craved. I felt I needed to consider this stage of research further in finding a way to represent research that was in keeping with the processes of level one research and level two research. In this interim model, level three represents the third stage of the research in which it is necessary to communicate the research to the wider community.

The results from my undergraduate co-operative inquiry had been presented by means of a 'findings fishbowl' in which we gave a presentation where all members of the group were present and we talked in front of the audience unscripted and in a way which represented our process as well as containing the content of 'what we had found out' which felt appropriate but which is not possible for all collaborative research. This was a valuable approach as it exposed our research and our way of working. In showing how we worked, which was conversational and seemingly unstructured, we received the comment which inspired this study; 'sounds like something that is nice to do for an afternoon but what makes it research?' and also comments about our oversights in terms of our claims of its democratic nature about which one audience member pointed out it was still a patriarchal method as the facilitator was an older male surrounded by young women. This represents the external peer debriefing (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Nutt Williams & Morrow, 2009) that aids the trustworthiness of the research; we later considered the power implications of the research (Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002; Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004 appendix 3 & 1). This interaction in the dissemination of the research felt much more in keeping with our collaborative method. I felt I needed to find a way in which research could be communicated that would feel in keeping with an intersubjective approach.

In the following chapter I explain the process and practices that enabled me to explore and develop this model further.

## Life Stages: How the three levels of inquiry aided our understanding

### **Level One**

Activities such as the drawing of life maps allowed us to focus individually on our own experiences, feelings and conceptions of the life course. The process of telling a story involved the consideration and mediation of that story before telling it and this was an analytical process in the way we considered how it was relevant to the group focus.

Between sessions we began to consider our own life stage and also how we understood the life stages of those around us. The way in which the research helped us explore our own experience facilitated personal growth, as one co-researcher stated the research, 'enabled me to grow as a person and understand 'who I am'.

### **Level Two**

The sharing of stories allowed us to recognise experiences and feelings we had in common, for example learning to drive, starting to drink alcohol and also the feeling of being made to grow up through being 'cast out' of the family home. This experience was exemplified by co-researchers' stories of their bedroom being turned into a bathroom or being referred to as the 'spare room' or the family home being sold and replaced with a smaller house. The identification of commonality in experience and anxieties was growth promoting, for example, we were uncomfortable about asserting a 'right' over a place in our family home (where we no longer lived full time) but we were equally upset by the examples above which showed that this place was no longer 'ours'. This experience and our feelings about it was uncovered through our conversations and the identification of this as something that was not specific to us as individuals was both growth promoting and a potentially informative finding.

### **Level Three**

We were conscious of a desire to produce some propositions or informative findings out of the research (which we did through our definition of life stages and the stages of responsibility) although we became much more interested in our process.

We communicated the findings from our research and gave a demonstration of our way of working at a departmental research seminar. We referred to this as our third return to propositional knowing as we worked through our propositions before the audience. Questions asked by the audience helped us to develop our understanding, with points made about the simplicity of our stages of responsibility (for example an audience member pointing out that their children had left home but they were not yet responsible for their parents). Points were also raised about our approach, one being the question, ‘what makes it research?’ which inspired this study and also questions about power which we later addressed in our published paper.

One co-researcher remembers the presentation as being the point at which we realised how personal the topic was when a member of the audience pointed out that we were at a time of transition in our own life stages. Another co-researcher reported that during the presentation it became clear that the research was a safe means of each individual voicing their hopes, fears and aspirations about life. This illustrates the points I make later in the thesis (Chapter 6) about the way a level three process enables the identification of key outcomes.

The published paper formed another level three process which involved my working with all the individual reports from this study to create one paper which explored the importance of our personal focus (appendix 1). In this paper we focused on the research approach and the outcome of personal growth, but in chapter 7 I discuss the way in which the personal growth enabled the uncovering of informative findings.

## Chapter 5 - Research Process and Practice

In this chapter I identify the method of my research retrospectively. As a result of the study I advocate a reflection on what is known and how understanding has developed rather than following a prescriptive method. This discussion of an alternative way of viewing ‘data’, ‘analysis’ and ‘findings’ is useful to other potential researchers in realising how they can use aspects of the reflexive practice or personal learning they have already embarked upon to develop a research process which leads to outcomes that are informative and of use to others.

Here I describe what I have done in exploring the three levels of research and I include a timeline detailing my activities and the development of my understanding chronologically which is accompanied by a guide to where further explanation and illustration can be found in the thesis and the appendices.

Whilst conducting and writing up my research I have had great difficulty in justifying my research in terms of ‘data’, ‘analysis’, and ‘findings’. Having developed out of empirical frameworks, the evaluation of research often centres on the ability to replicate a study. This requires a step by step account showing a linear progression from tangible data to concrete results. I have not followed a method in this linear manner. Any realisation of how I have collected and analysed data, and indeed what the data is, has occurred through reflection rather than being pre-determined by a structure or plan. Having said this, my approach is of course



informed by theory as established in the literature review. Once I had outlined the model as it is presented in chapter 4, I used this model as a framework for reflecting on the model. This was not a re-visiting but a deepening and checking of my understanding aided by new experiences which offered the opportunity to question my earlier thinking. Sharing what had been found to work in earlier groups allowed subsequent groups to develop the approach with me. In addition the refining of the model was aided by the supervision process where supervisors would directly question my assumptions, point out how they may have been influenced by literature and more often reflect back to me what I was telling them in a way which enabled me to see my own points more clearly. This occurred to the extent that my e-mails regarding a particular thought or concern would end with 'actually writing this to you has helped me work it out' which was about my predicting their response and thus putting myself into the devil's advocate role suggested by Heron (1996). Supervisors, co-researchers, the literature and myself as devil's advocate would offer the peer debriefing recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Nutt Williams and Morrow (2009).

On reflection I have identified equivalent forms of 'data', 'analysis', and 'findings' that show the progression of my ideas and it is the ability to show this development of understanding that, in my opinion, justifies what I have done as 'research'. This is discussed in more detail later (chapter 6).

The processes that I have identified as equivalent to data, analysis and findings are outlined below as a step by step approach but it is important to note that I have not

worked in such a linear fashion and I do not necessarily intend my model of research to be used in a prescriptive manner, but as a framework for reflection.

Put simply the research cycle as identified through this study is as follows:

- a) Experience is *data*.
- b) The process of understanding this experience is *analysis*.
- c) The understanding that results is a *finding*.
- d) Reflecting on how this understanding was reached is *analysis*. (making stage b) *data*).
- e) The understanding of this process is a *finding*.

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A later suggestion arising out of this study is that when this understanding is communicated it can become data for another level of inquiry for another individual or group. (see chapter 6)

In communicating my process and my practices I will refer to *experience* (for example my participation in a research group) which is communicated as an *understanding* (for example an explanation of our research practices) so the reader arrives at stage c) of the proposed cycle outlined above. I will then provide a reflection on the process of understanding facilitated through the three levels of research proposed in the model (for example how understanding developed through the practices in a research group and the way this has informed my model). This will be the resulting understanding that is point e) in the cycle.

Why is it a cycle? The cycle explained above illustrates how each experience as data can be transformed into an informative finding. In any inquiry there are likely to be a number of

experiences, or aspects of an experience that are explored. In researching life-stages we had conversations about the feeling of being pushed out of our family home which had resulted from stories about, for example, how a co-researcher's bedroom had been turned into a bathroom. This was only one aspect of life-stages we discussed and so there were cycles through the process regarding different experiences, this being a cyclical process because our learning resulting from one experience informed the way we understood the next story. Using the life-stages example, our stories about a bedroom in the parental home being converted into a bathroom changed the way we viewed the significance of maintaining Christmas traditions (see chapter 7). In addition to this, as discussed above, a *finding* may become experiential data when it is shared; an individual's finding about an experience becomes a new experience when it is shared with a group, this being the experience of telling or hearing the story. When research is shared through a level three representation it is then the 'data' another individual can process through their own inquiry.

In forming an understanding which can be communicated there is a level one process and essentially the act of creating the output becomes an experience which can start a reflexive process (a cycle). The understanding I communicate in this thesis has been through multiple cycles of my understanding of my experience. For example, some of the chapters I have written have been re-written repeatedly over the last few years. The writing and re-writing has become part of the research experience, in that it is a process of formulating my propositions as an intra-personal process, and as such creates a loop in a research cycle which enables me to make explicit those felt sense concepts. The way I have made sense through writing is illustrated by examples given in appendix 5; some of the writing

presented in these examples has become part of the final thesis but the writing also developed my thinking as an introspective process.

The notion of a cycle is also relevant to the three levels of inquiry, as the process of personal growth and then the movement to informative research is a cycle of reflection, checking our understanding against the experience we are exploring and comparing it with others who share the experience and may have an alternative understanding of it.

The cycle could be about re-entering the research process with new insight, for example, I communicated my understanding of group research process at the start of group inquiries and moved from my level one understanding to a new process of level two research with those co-researchers, meaning any subsequent understanding had cycled through my own understanding (level one) to communicated understanding (level three) and to understanding generated with others (level two) multiple times in terms of the number of research groups but also for each idea shared within those research groups. At times this involved the group challenging my assumptions, such as members of the third research group making clear they did not see creative expression as a useful research process and the way my experience of this group disproved any theory I had that a theme for research *would* emerge out of time spent together engaging with one another and the group (discussed in chapter 7). Also important in this cycling is the exploration of *how* I came to understand and not just the identification of *what* I understand.

I have reflected on experiences and understanding in relation to the three levels of my model. I have questioned how my introspective process has developed a level

one understanding, how my interpersonal experiences have developed a level two (collective) understanding and how my experiences of both creating and receiving research outputs contributes to an understanding of level three inquiry (the communication of research findings as being part of an ongoing research process rather than an end point).

My reflections have resulted in the identification of processes; that is ways changes in understanding occur through personal growth, and practices; which are the activities that have been used to facilitate the necessary processes.

Due to the identification of my research process being embedded in my resulting understanding, details of the processes and practices that I have found to facilitate the development of personal growth and learning, and thus the emergence of theory, will appear in the following chapter. Below I will establish the activities I have been involved in during the course of my PhD research which have allowed me to explore and reflect on the model. I make clear the way the activity contributed to my understanding in an accompanying commentary. This is presented chronologically although reflections on these various practices have run through the course of this research, eventually resulting in the formation of the propositions made in this thesis as informative outcomes.

Through the process of writing this thesis I have also recognised three phases which I have progressed through. I have framed the development of my understanding through these phases. These are discussed in the following chapter but briefly they comprise:

## **Phase One**

This is a phase out of which the subject for inquiry emerges. Out of this phase pre-propositional knowing (Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002; Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004 see appendices 1&3) is identified which is the understanding we have developed about the phenomenon before we realised we were researching it. Examples of where this knowing may have emerged from include experience, practice, introspection, conversation or reading. In our earlier definitions this is referred to as the time we spent together and the experiences we shared whereas I now see it as the understanding we expressed. In chapter 6 I reflect on how my interim model is the result of my pre-propositional knowing as although I knew I was researching aspects of research a new phase of the research was emerging and I researched the levels of inquiry before actually conceiving of them as such. This does not diminish the extent to which this interim model is an outcome of the research.

## **Phase Two**

This phase began with reflection on how the pre-propositional knowing was developed. Reflection on the three levels of inquiry facilitated deeper understanding. In this study the exploration of how my understanding had developed enabled me to identify processes that aid the transformation of meaning between levels of inquiry and I was then able to introduce these processes as guiding parts of subsequent studies, including the use of growth promoting techniques from counselling in deepening both my own disclosure and that of co-researchers having identified the importance of personal growth as a research process.

### **Phase Three**

This is the phase where the resulting understanding is formed in such a way as to make it understandable to an audience. I have realised this is an important part of the study, where I am still researching and that the insight developed here is as valuable as at any other stage of the inquiry. This is an important phase where the emerging theory is identified regarding findings that can be informative to others and make a contribution to knowledge.

The following describes the activities I was engaged with chronologically throughout the study and in the accompanying text box I explain the way these activities contributed to my emerging theories about research and where this is represented in the thesis. In addition appendices relating to the time period are listed with an explanation of their relevance.

#### **Timeline of Research Practices, Emerging Understanding and Relevant Appendices**

##### ***Final Undergraduate Year 99/2000***

I was the member of a collaborative research group following the approach of co-operative experiential inquiry. I later published outcomes from this research (Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004, appendix 1). This is the experience, along with my undergraduate dissertation, through which I began to formulate ideas about research methodology. The key points concerned the recognition that in researching human experience

**Key Theories Emerging from the Activities and the location of further discussion or examples in the thesis**

##### **Phase One**

- An understanding of the potential for a subjective approach **pg.25-35**
- An interest in introspective elements in collaborative research and collaborative elements in introspective research. **Pg. 9 & appendix 2**

if the human who has the experience ‘does’ the researching themselves a richer understanding is achieved (as outlined in chapter 2 and influenced by Moustakas, 1961; 1990; Reason and Heron, 1986; Heron, 1996; Reason and Rowan, 1981).

I completed my undergraduate dissertation on ‘Belonging’ as a heuristic study (see appendix 2). My initial engagement was through reading Moustakas’ ‘Loneliness’ (1961) which highlighted my own feelings of belonging. As I researched with a friendship group I also incorporated a collaborative element by including a group meeting with all co-researchers, reasoning that as we belonged together we should research belonging together. I felt that the subjective study should have been much more of the collaborative nature given that the subject is based on togetherness and following reports from the co-researchers that they would have taken a more active role I developed an interest in involving all co-researchers in researching their own experience.

- A recognition of personal growth as an outcome of research and (when later working with the reports as part of the PhD research) the way this enhanced the research process. **Pg. 147-159**
- Pre-propositional knowing (that we develop understanding and theory about an experience before we know we are researching it).

**Chapter 2** documents my own pre-propositional knowing. The full explanation of pre-propositional knowing can be found at **Pg. 122-124** and the explanation of the pre-propositional knowing for this research group is on **Pg. 124**

- Organic emergence (established later on reflection) **Pg. 118-120**
- Conversation as a research ‘method’ **Pg. 136-140**

### **Appendices relevant to this period:**

#### Appendix 1

This is the paper published out of the research group I was a part of during this time and it catalogues the development of ideas relating to the life stages group. This is the point at which I began to understand the importance of personal growth



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### ***2000-2001***

I was a co-researcher in a collaborative inquiry group which comprised five undergraduate students, myself and the facilitator/tutor. Our focus emerged as ‘connectedness’ a term which we used to describe feelings of connection with other people. We researched through conversation and creative exploration realising our experiences and understanding of connectedness were diverse but we reached a shared understanding of these different subjective meanings.

as a developmental outcome. This was the seed for the realisation that personal growth could be a tool for research.

### **Appendix 2**

The abstract from my undergraduate dissertation is included and a reflection on this study which was the foundation of my interest in methodology. The reflections also demonstrate the development of my understanding through the course of my PhD research (the reflection was written in 2005)

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- The potential for building a collective understanding from differing understanding in a group. **Pg. 137-138**
- A developed understanding of personal growth and personal learning as a research outcome. **Pg. 147-151**
- Conflict in the group as an opportunity to deepen understanding and as potentially growth promoting. **Pg. 154-155**
- Creativity as a way of exploring experiences that are difficult to verbalise. **Pg. 143-146**
- The recognition of aspects of other’s individual subjective inquiries that resonated with my own experience and growing

On registering for MPhil I began an immersion in the literature and in subjective process through conversations with undergraduate researchers engaged in heuristic and autoethnographic dissertations. I worked with the reports from co-researchers of the co-operative inquiry groups I had been a part of (examples given in appendix 6) and those from previous groups which informed Wilkins et al (1999).

philosophy. This included the process I later referred to as organic emergence (initially a recognition of the intense personal interest researchers often have in their subject area **Pg. 117-119**) and the capacity for personal growth in an individual study as well as in a group venture **Pg. 148**.

**Appendices relevant to this period:**

Appendix 4

This appendix includes my own notes on some of the undergraduate dissertations I engaged with. I include these to give examples of the nature of the projects I was studying and to demonstrate my practice when working with them. The projects were dated between 2001 and 2005 and I worked with the reports, and at times the researchers during this time, but also reflected on the reports and my own notes at various times during my research.

Appendix 6

Examples of reports from co-researchers from the connectedness group are included in this appendix including

reference to conflict and doubts about our purpose in the group.

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### **2001-2002**

Again I was the member of a collaborative inquiry, this time six undergraduates elected to join the group. I shared my ideas about research with the group and in doing this they were incorporated into the group approach, including the idea of organic emergence (see chapter 6 and Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004 appendix 1) In this group we did not even establish a title for the research – it seemingly did not ‘work’ and the climate in the group differed from that of the previous two groups. This was the first group where students who had no previous experience of working in a reflexive way or communicating with others in a person centred

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- The importance of a person centred approach and an explicit use of this to facilitate personal growth and group development with the purpose of uncovering meaning for research. **Pg. 117, 120, 154-156, chapter 7**
  - On reflection I realise the importance of questioning the nature of the understanding that is emerging from the group’s time together at certain points throughout the research (chapter 7)

way took part in the research. I discuss in chapter 6 the way in which my experiences in this group developed my understanding and in chapter 7 I highlight why no informative findings were reached.

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**2002-2003**

I formulated my interim model and transferred my study from MPhil to PhD in the light of this. I took the lead role in facilitating a collaborative research group and did so using my proposed model. I made a point of initiating a discussion about how group members expected to interact with one another and thus highlighted the necessary person centred principles. The group, made up of fifteen students, one tutor and myself researched ‘relatedness’. We used conversation and creative techniques as in previous groups but also quite diverse practices often introduced by the student

**Appendices relevant to this period:**

Appendix 3

This is a paper written using the experience of the first group I was a part of but which gives a deeper discussion of research as ‘person-centred’. It also shows a development in my thinking in that personal growth is discussed as an outcome of research and as beneficial, but not as an intentional ‘way’ of researching.

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**Phase Two**

- The design of the model
- Chapter 4**
- Having studied the reports from previous groups and reflected on my own experiences I was able to identify activities and processes which aided personal growth and the development of research findings. **Chapter 6**
  - Personal growth proves to be a key factor in the development of group understanding for group 4.
- Pg. 151-155**

members such as explaining the socks we were wearing one particular day as a way of sharing something about ourselves with the group.

The ‘hot-seat interview’, where each member took a turn in being interviewed by the rest of the group, was a key feature of this inquiry as it was growth promoting and informative (discussed in chapter six and illustrated in appendix 7). The findings were represented through poems made up of our individual statements which we took from the ‘letter to the group’ we had each written. The statements referred to the relationship in the group, the group process and the representation of the individuals who made up the group through their characterisation as animals. This seemed to be about the way we had understood one another on an authentic level.

In addition to the research group I assisted in the facilitation of a group convened for an undergraduate elective entitled, ‘experiences in groups’ which was an encounter group with the aim of providing the students with experiential knowledge of such groups on which they reflected for assessment. This was an interesting experience in demonstrating that a group formed to

- The importance of a climate for growth **Pg. 152-155**
- The striking way in which the ‘hot-seat’ facilitated the climate in this particular group and the way in which it encouraged disclosure and openness in addition to it being a way of feeding back to group members that we had understood who they were on a deep and personal level. **Pg. 141-143**
- On reflection involvement in ‘experiences in groups’ allowed me to understand the crucial distinction between personal growth as an outcome of interaction and personal growth as a research tool which can inform academic understanding (**chapter 7**)

**Appendices relevant to this period:**

Appendix 7

This appendix is a report I wrote following the study of co-researcher accounts from the group researching relatedness. The accounts were specifically focused on the ‘hot-seat’ experience. I used extracts from

enhance personal growth and learning does not arrive at research outcomes and understanding in the way that the research groups have. This is discussed in relation to the group that did not ‘work’ in chapter 7.

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**2003-2004**

At the beginning of the academic year I gave birth to my first son. Despite my attempts I had not managed to complete my PhD. A collaborative research group went ahead without me and they researched ‘trust’. I had worked with this group of students (around fifteen in number and interestingly including one male for the first time since my undergraduate group) during the previous year in an encounter group. This was an interesting opportunity to see the difference between the group convened for encounter and one convened for the purpose of research, the difference in intention resulting in a different outcome; one where there was personal

the co-researchers’ reports to form this piece. This piece of work and the experience itself showed the importance of the climate, the element of a level one process occurring for each group member and the way personal growth allowed new insights to emerge that could be shared with the group.

- .....
- The difference between a research group and an encounter group **chapter 7**
  - My changing identity becomes a focus which later causes me to question the way the model is useful to those who may feel detached from academia and those who can only research sporadically rather than being able to immerse themselves completely in a project. **Chapter 8; Pg. 266-269**

learning and a level of group understanding and one where there was a clearly defined developed understanding about the particular focus of trust with resulting propositional knowledge that could be informative to others.

Although I wanted to still be engaged in the research and in the university environment I had become immersed in a new identity as a mother (discussed in chapter 7) and found myself spending minimal time at the university engaging with my research, always being drawn back home as that was where I wanted to be. Later in the academic year I got married and had appendicitis and the research started slipping away.

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### **2004-2005**

I used the written reports from the above group research in expanding my understanding (examples in appendix 6) and as I had worked with this group of students in the year previous to the inquiry in a unit entitled, ‘experiences in groups’ which used encounter in a similar way, I felt I had a good understanding of the members of this group and the climate of their combined personalities. I had a feeling of loss at not being a part of this group. Having been engaged in a different process altogether during the previous year (that of becoming a mother as discussed in

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- Developed understanding of the overall process through which the personal growth is enhanced and becomes learning that can be informative to others.

### **Chapter 6**

#### **Appendices relevant to this period:**

#### Appendix 8

The approach I have modelled represents the way the groups I have been a part of have worked together. This ‘working’ together

chapter 8) I returned to begin writing my PhD which involved a return to both the literature and the data. In revisiting the reports from the collaborative research groups I wrote a creative synthesis to story the way these groups developed.

is much better characterised as 'being together' and the fictional group story conveys the essence of the experience of being in the groups without focusing on one group or disclosing details about one group. It is a creative synthesis of my understanding following my experiences in the groups I have been a part of, my immersion in the reports of co-researchers and my development of the approach.

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### ***2005-2006***

Total immersion in my role as a mother and another pregnancy meant the methodological study faded away as I involved myself in toddler crafts and wilted on the sofa with the exhaustion and sickness of carrying a baby.

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- Revisiting my thinking and the various pieces of writing, both of my own and of others, allowed me to check my assumptions and the exasperation that I was not finding anything 'new' became reassurance that this was because my earlier assumptions about what worked as a research



## **2006-2009**

My studies were suspended on various grounds and at various points. The reasons for this are explored in chapter 7 as part of the research. This became an experiential phase which has enriched the study and resulted in a developed model (discussed in chapters 6, 8, and 9).

During this time I continued to work towards writing up the study which typically involved re-reading and re-writing about aspects of the research. Chapter 8 both characterises this time and was mostly researched and written during this time.

approach had continued to be verified. **Pg. 249-252**

- Motherhood had changed my identity and this had affected my confidence as a researcher (**Chapter 8**) but this later allowed me to understand how the model could be useful to others as a bridge between personal learning and growth and informative research. **Pg. 269-273**

### **Appendices relevant to this period:**

#### Appendix 5

Appendix 5 shows some of my writing and re-writing with appendix 5.1 giving a chronological but personal ‘story’ of my research journey. This was written in late 2007 as a way of creating a picture of the research to help with creating the thesis. This was a personal and introspective account in which I was open and honest and which was personally growthful.

During this time I was struggling with how to represent my understanding and on returning to my notes on undergraduate

dissertations (appendix 4) I recognised the way in which I would typically take notes which were as much about my reaction to the content of the work as they were about the work itself. This realisation about how I engaged with the outputs from other people's research was the root of my understanding about level three inquiry as an interactive process in which the reader begins their own cycle. In writing the piece that is included as appendix 5.2 I began to see how I wanted to 'tell it like it is' in a straightforward manner without either fictionalising my experience or reducing it to measured and evidenced 'parts' of the research.

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### ***2009-2010***

In my role as associate lecturer I convened and facilitated a research group which studied 'learning'. Twenty-one students, all female but from a range of backgrounds including four African born mature students elected to take part. Our conversations about difficulties engaging with certain parts of the course the

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- This was an opportunity to 'test' the model and using the activities and the processes explained in **Chapter 6** facilitated a process of growth and learning with potentially informative findings.

students were studying led to the focus of learning. In particular we developed understanding about the motivation to learn and the lack of confidence in our own abilities that contributed to a lack of motivation or distancing from learning. We also considered different cultural approaches to learning as the African born mature students in the group agreed that they witnessed a lack of value for learning in the UK, and amongst some of the other students in the group, where at 'home' studying at degree level was highly prized and of great importance.

.....

### **2010-2011**

Again I facilitated a research group, this time research emerged entitled, 'They Made me Who I Am: Daughters reflections on the importance of family' which was largely about the experiences of having an absent father and the way upbringing, even when not 'ideal' (although the vast minority of co-researchers had grown up in a conventional two parent family) was considered by the members of the group to have 'made us who we are' with all reporting they would not change their past despite continuing painful experiences. This group consisted

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- The outcomes in this group showed that the model could be used with groups of people who did not have experience of the person-centred approach or research. However, it did highlight through moments of conflict and the sharing of difficult and personal stories that a facilitator, or someone with an ability to deal with such situations is needed. **Pg266-275**

of co-researchers, none of whom had worked in a person centred way, formally reflected on their experiences, or worked with others where they were required to be open to their experiences and listen actively. This did create tensions at some points largely due to members not feeling they should burden the group with their own feelings and experiences, however, this was a very productive group both in terms of the research outcomes and the personal outcomes with many reporting their own learning and growth.

.....

### ***Phase Three – Level Three 2012***

This was the year I finally formed my research into a thesis.

.....

### **Phase Three**

- Phase three of the research is about developing the level three process where understanding can be shared with an audience. It is only during this phase that I realised this is about identifying the parts of the research that are informative and that could be built on by others as much as it is about finding a means to communicate understanding in an evocative way.

## A Summary of my Activities and Practices in Exploring the Three Levels

### *Level One - Subjective Process*

My research into subjective process has been primarily through my own reflexive journey facilitated by the literature and my level two experiences. I have also had contact with undergraduate students while they were conducting their independent studies, using informal conversation as a way of exploring our experiences and I have been informed by a number of undergraduate dissertations as explained in the following chapter (examples of my notes appear in appendix 4). My time in collaborative research groups has also been part of my subjective experience and thus my research into individual subjective process. This has been identified by my own reflexive process, through the collaborative inquiries themselves, and echoed in the reports of co-researchers which were submitted for assessment as part of their undergraduate degree programmes.

### *Level Two - Research Groups*

The seven research groups I have been a part of have been influenced by the framework of co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986), but operated in a less structured manner. We engaged democratically and our way of being together resembled an encounter group (Rogers, 1985) much more than a research group through our focus on being together as a group and our way of paying attention to one another individually and collectively.

My ideas about approaches to researching in a group increasingly became a part of the way the groups worked; for example through the integration of heuristic research concepts and allowing for organic emergence (discussed in chapter 6). The groups were not just research groups but were resonant of an encounter group (Rogers, 1985) meaning person centred principles were encouraged and personal growth was an outcome and also of benefit to the research process (discussed in chapter 6 and Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004 ). I give a fictional group story which exemplifies the group process in appendix 8.

### *Level Three*

Exploring the communication of research outcomes has been a subjective and introspective process. There have also been practical dimensions in writing for publication (Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002 & Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004, appendices 3&1). I initially thought I would be forming some kind of output which would be 'tested' by 'seeing what people thought of it'. I became so immersed in my process of engaging with other people's research that this experience became the data – which is in keeping with the subjective nature of my model. In writing this thesis I have finally entered a level three phase in my study and this is discussed in chapter 6 as the development of my understanding of this level.

### Life Stages: The data, analysis and results cycle

For each conversation and proposition in the life stages study there was the process of moving experience as data to findings and establishing the way in which we had arrived at those findings. Here I give one example but more of the informative findings established through this process are discussed in chapter 7.

**a) Experience is data**

For the life stages research the ‘data’ was the co-researchers experiences of life stages.

**b) The process of understanding this experience is analysis**

The experience was analysed in the telling of the story to the group. Recognising the significance of the story in itself is a discovery as we may know we have had an experience but when reflecting on it in a supportive environment there is a new understanding of the meaning attributed to the experience. For example, we talked about getting drunk in the local park as teenagers which may have been the kind of conversation we would hold with friends in different situations but in the research group we recognised this experience as a rite of passage.

**c) The understanding that results is a finding**

Included in our definition of life stages is the statement, ‘These events tend to occur in the same order (but possibly at different times) for most people’

**d) Reflecting on how this understanding was reached is analysis**

We had all been through the stage of rebellion (characterised by drinking alcohol) in our adolescence apart from one group member who had inspired the conversation by talking about how she felt she was going through a rebellious stage and how she hadn’t done this when she was younger. We began to question if certain stages, such as rebellion, were inevitable even if they did not occur at the age normal for the society or community you

were part of. The process in relation to the three levels of inquiry could be understood as:

**Level One** – My understanding related to a time when drinking in the park was about a new level of independence and about a new social group which I was a part of and which was not tied to family or school links.

**Level Two** - Our understanding was that this was a stage of life characterised by rebellion which manifested as drinking alcohol and was an element of a transition into adulthood (my feeling of independence and the establishment of a social group that is ‘my own’ fits in with this).

**Level Three** – Their understanding will be of the way a specific group of people (the research group) have explained their adolescent drinking as a life stage. We questioned if this was a cultural aspect of growing up and if everybody goes through this stage and if some do not, are there any differences in their later development?

e) **The understanding of this process is a finding**

As I advocate the establishment of the method retrospectively the recognition of how an understanding is reached is an additional finding. Through reflection on our process I was able to identify the importance of conversation. In understanding the process by which we had reached our finding we also needed to recognise *why* we had understood the experience in this way which involved acknowledging the limitations of our proposition, in this case that drinking alcohol as a rebellious rite of passage was culturally specific. The use of fictional or biographical literature to ‘check’ our assumptions also offered an insight into how our reading, along with programmes we watched influenced the way we saw life stages.

↓



The notion of life stages as culturally specific began a new cycle of this research process along with the idea that if we ‘miss’ stages there may be consequences in our later life. One of the ways we explored this was through our engagement with biographies, in this case Paul McCartney’s *Many Years From Now* where he discusses missing out on important stages of growing up because of becoming famous at a young age.

### **Ethical Considerations**

My ethical considerations are related to the impact of the research activities on co-researchers, the informed involvement of the co-researchers and the use of the co-researchers findings and reflections.

The majority of my co-researchers have been students, both those I have elected to work with as part of this research and those I have worked with in the role of associate lecturer.

This warrants a reflection on the ethics of engaging students in my research process.

I have made all co-researchers aware of my research and the way the nature of it means I develop my understanding through all of my experiences which includes the work in which they are involved.

Where I have worked with student assignments and reports in furthering my understanding I have gained their verbal consent and I have made clear that their identities would not be revealed if I used any of their words in my study.

When working in groups and with possible sensitive issues the groups have all agreed that what a co-researcher says in the group setting is to remain confidential. I have always been prepared to refer co-researchers to the university's counselling service should the need arise.

I have taken the position of recognising the co-researchers as autonomous individuals who have elected to work with me and in doing so they retain responsibility for themselves and ownership of their learning processes. We have entered into a collaboration out of which they gain in the same ways I do; both in personal development and academic advancement. In this sense the focus is on mutuality (Southgate and Randall, 1981; Mearns and Thorne, 1988)

I refer to Natiello's (1990: 272) guidelines for relationships that promote collaborative power:

- 1) Openness (all information is fully shared) *All information regarding my study was shared, or I was prepared to share it.*
- 2) Responsiveness (all needs and ideas are carefully heard) *Along with my co-researchers I was aware of the need to be responsive and did so to the best of my ability.*
- 3) Dignity (everyone is respected and considered) *I endeavoured to retain the dignity of all co-researchers and would not use any material that compromised this.*

- 4) Personal Empowerment (each person affected feels free and responsible to participate fully) *This refers to my above point that co-researchers engaged as autonomous individuals and that this research was not done 'to' them but co-created by them.*
- 5) Alternating Influence (impact on group process moves from one person to another) *While I had influence over the whole study as it is my subjective interpretation, influence alternated in the research groups.*
- 6) Co-operation rather than competition *co-researchers co-operated fully.*

The above applies to those co-researchers I was aware may inform my research.

There have also been other people who I have engaged in conversation with, whose work I have read or whose ideas have inspired me without me realising the influence at the time or who I have no way of contacting. I extend the same principles outlined above in the way I engage with their input and I have acknowledged my sources where they can be identified.

An important point to make regarding the ethics of this study is that all the representations in this thesis are my own interpretations and are therefore a representation of my subjective understanding.

In the following chapter I present my developed understanding of the research process as a revised 'model' and reflect on this development by the means illustrated above.

## **Chapter 6 – The Resulting Model: A reflection on the development of my understanding of the research process.**

This chapter includes the description of the processes which facilitate personal growth and enable the transformation of this growth into informative research. Essentially this chapter represents my resulting understanding and as such it is the ‘findings’ of the thesis.

The model and the processes as described here make explicit the original knowledge emerging from the research. One contribution is the recognition of personal growth as a research process and the explanation of ways in which this is achieved. Secondly, the identification and description of intersubjective processes which allow the development of insight and understanding can inform others wishing to engage in this approach. Organic emergence, pre-propositional knowing, creativity, conversation and storytelling, the use of the person-centred approach and the transformation of meaning are processes and practices which could be used, but also developed and added to, by others.

The three level model represents an original interpretation of the research process and the potential for the model to be an accessible way for non-academics to research. This provides new possibilities which can be built upon in terms of research topic and research method.

In this chapter I recount the ways in which I have explored and reflected on the model as outlined in the previous chapter. I explain the resulting model through

this process. One realisation as a result of this second phase of research is the way in which I see the research process as more fluid than the model implies. What has emerged is the importance of the processes that enable the transformation of meaning through the levels of inquiry leading to the developed, resulting understanding. This is essentially what I see as research – the transformation of understanding through three reflexive spaces: '*Me*', '*Us*' and '*Them*'.

As a result of this inquiry I have identified my own research approach which could also aid others in engaging in a research process. First I give the outline of the overall process and then I will explain the processes and practices within this. Illustrations of the process in action are given in the following chapter where I discuss my individual research into motherhood and work apnoea, in appendix 8 where I offer a fictional collaborative inquiry group story and in chapter 8 where I highlight the way the approach resulted in informative findings for the group researching life stages. Appendix 5.1 is a piece of writing entitled, 'Researching Research and Living Life' which is a reflexive chronological story of my journey and the development of my understanding.

## Phase One

*Organic Emergence...*



*Identification of the focus of inquiry*



*Recognition of pre-propositional knowing*



## Phase Two

*Through reflection on the building of this*

*pre- propositional knowing the second phase*

*of the research begins which involves*

*engagement with the understanding of 'me',*

*'us', and 'them' (essentially questioning,*

*'what do I understand?', 'what do we*

*understand?', 'what do they understand?')*

*Creation of an open  
state*

*During this phase there  
will be times of  
immersion and  
incubation.*

*This is a fluid and possibly 'messy' process*

*but involves immersion in the focus of*

*inquiry.*



*Reflection on process...*

*The researcher(s) reflect on the process of*

*understanding as a retrospective method.*

*Here the process of understanding can be*

*delved into by clarifying,*

*ME – What was my introspective process?*

*How do I understand?*

*US – Through what processes and practices*

*was understanding co-generated with others?*

*'How do we understand?'*

*THEM – How was I influenced by the*

*representation of related experience?*

*(research or colloquial)*

### **Phase Three**

*How do I present my understanding; How*

*will 'they' understand and what is the*

*learning from my process which could inform*

*others?*

I will first explore some of the processes and practices that I have identified through reflecting on my own research experiences. I will then explain how these processes and practices aid the building of understanding as an overall process. Explanation of the processes or practices appear in textboxes which give an overview that could be extracted as the 'how to' model of inquiry. These textboxes also give statements of my findings which will be referred back to in the following chapter in establishing the possible applications and contribution to knowledge this study offers.

Reflections on how the processes and activities helped develop personal growth and informative findings in the life stages group are also included throughout. Where the typeface used is Arial I explain my own process regarding the study as a whole.



**Phase One Engaging with the subject of inquiry: Organic emergence and pre-propositional knowing**

***Engaging with a subject for inquiry***

I am merging Moustakas' terminology of 'identifying with the focus of inquiry' and 'initial engagement' (see Moustakas, 1990: 15, 27) but it describes the process well as I feel the topics I research are those that I am already interested in and that I have some understanding and experience of. Choosing to research them is a case of focusing my interest, or rather my interest *becoming* focused through a reflexive process. This process is not always a deliberate one, although there is often a need for research to be done, for example with undergraduates there is a need to 'find something to research' for assessment. An example of starting to research without realising it is the two studies that have run alongside the main PhD for me. I found myself researching motherhood as a result of repeated conversations with friends and also researching what I now call 'work apnoea' as I became aware of my inability to write up my PhD research. These studies are illustrations of the model in action and are explained in chapter 8.

In different ways other (particularly heuristic) researchers whose work I have studied mention the way in which the decision to research a topic is a realisation about what they are interested in. For example one co-researcher reports that she wasn't aware that the initial engagement stage of heuristic research was happening, another writes,

I suppose the very beginning of my research could have begun even before my teens, which may not have been in any type of order or structure with sophisticated theories, however the experience very much existed

Walton (2008, unpublished thesis) writes about a ‘lifelong inquiry’ in her search for meaning and reflects on experiences from the 1970’s in terms of how they inform and inspire her search for meaning.

This notion of the researcher developing both an interest in and understanding of the phenomenon before they begin to research it consciously illustrates a process I have termed ‘organic emergence’ when talking about the group research projects I have been a part of.

During research group 1 we struggled to decide on a topic to research. Despite this we continued to spend our time together sharing stories and concerns. The topic of ‘life stages’ was something that with hindsight we recognised as the focus of many of our early discussions. The focus had emerged out of our time together. In subsequent groups it was suggested to the group that we could deliberately use this as a method and that rather than ‘decide’ on a topic we could allow it to emerge out of a process of group building. This was often met with enthusiasm which was equally as often tainted with anxiety. Only on one occasion did the group fail to identify a topic, although there did seem to be a focus on acceptance (see chapter 7). Of course there are limitations to this approach, such as this only being applicable when the subject for inquiry is the choice of the co-researchers, but there is the potential to use organic emergence to identify a particular focus for a pre-determined area of research.

## ***Organic Emergence***

Organic emergence is the process of allowing a subject or theme for research to develop out of the inquiry rather than being pre-determined. The subject may emerge out of an individual researcher's reflections or out of a group's time together. This is not suitable for all projects but is particularly effective as a way of democratising the 'choice' of research topic or focus. The group will spend time being together and learning more about one another, during which time group building exercises can be used, or a simple encounter approach (Rogers, 1985) to time together. Often the group will find themselves naturally returning repeatedly to a particular subject or will recognise on reflection that their discussions relate to a particular theme. For an individual researcher the focus may emerge out of personal experience and reflection, through keeping a diary, or out of particular interest in a subject area.

### Life Stages: The first organic emergence

The concept of organic emergence ‘emerged’ during the first co-operative inquiry group. We decided to spend time getting to know one another before focusing on a topic for inquiry. We used creative methods from art therapy; drawing our position in the group and drawing our lives at that time. We spent a day out in local woods and had a picnic, feeling that removing ourselves from our usual room would help develop our relationship. We spent most of our time talking.

Members of the group started to get frustrated that we did not have a focus for our research. One coffee break three of us suddenly realised ‘life stages’ seemed to be a theme of our conversations and meetings. When we suggested this to the rest of the group they agreed with an enthusiastic, “yes, that’s it!” We realised our conversations had revolved around leaving university and how we felt we were going through a time of transition into adulthood. The day we spent in the woods was playful and we stated when planning it that we wanted to return to childhood. On reflection all of this was part of the research and led us to the topic of ‘life stages’. I later began to refer to this process as ‘organic emergence’ and recognised that it could be used as a way of focusing on a topic for inquiry as a first stage of research by choice.

The idea of organic emergence was a vague notion but during my PhD research I have had the opportunity to develop this concept through reflections on that first inquiry group and through using the process in subsequent groups.

Group two elected to allow the theme for research to evolve out of our group process and found connectedness to be a subject that was in tune with the needs and interests of all of us. Group three stumbled along and I don't know if we did make a decision to follow the organic emergence process or whether we just did not know what else to do. We did not arrive at a topic and I see that as being down to our inability to engage with one another fully (see chapter 7). The process of organic emergence relies heavily on the development of a climate within the group that facilitates sharing and growth in the same way that climate in therapy would foster this relationship between client and counsellor (discussed below). It is in developing a group relationship that a subject for research can evolve out of the process. This creates an open state in the group where introspective exploration and insight can occur.

In group four the relationship in the group very quickly characterised one which was illustrative of a person centred 'climate for growth' in the way we were together. This was reflected in the topic of 'relatedness' which emerged. We initially talked about the way we related to people outside the group but our final reflections and 'return to propositional knowing' were focused on relating within the group.

I was not a member of group five which, working with a different facilitator, focused on 'trust' as a topic as the result of a more conventional brainstorming session. For me this highlights the way we should not rule out ways of working on

the basis that they are 'conventional'. However, one member of this group reported that, "in some ways this group was a continuation of the experiences in groups elective in year two" and this previous group experience, which most members of the research group shared, will have given some form of understanding and curiosity which led to a collective interest in trust.

Following some years where I was not involved in collaborative research groups I facilitated two groups which elected to follow the organic emergence process. The first of this second wave of groups researched 'learning'. Our conversations in the sessions leading up to this focus would often evolve into being about the co-researchers anxieties about their course, their ability to understand the academic discourse and their ability to produce work of a high enough standard. The following year another group researched family and although not apparent at the time a session of 'show and tell' in which we all brought in something that was important to us and 'said' something about us opened up the subject of family which dominated our conversations over the following weeks.

The organic emergence phase for this study was my time as an undergraduate. From the beginning of my degree the seeds were being sown. I was introduced to the person centred approach practically through a unit entitled, 'introduction to strand' in which we reflected on ourselves through various activities, mostly from counselling and psychotherapy, and shared who we were as a result of this with the group. We used creative approaches from art therapy; we used teddy bears and rocks in projective techniques where we chose one and explained our choice, for example a

rock that had a particular formation we were drawn to or that represented something about ourselves, or the choice of a teddy bear – in my case because it was particularly scruffy and unloved. My learning about the person centred approach was also a result of the way it was embodied in the approach of particular tutors. As I progressed through my undergraduate course I learnt about various aspects and theories of human communication including physiological processes in the brain, sociological theories of culture and communication, psychological theories of communication and counselling theory as a way of exploring therapeutic communication. I was most interested in the opportunities to reflect on my own experience or to listen to the experiences of others. I became interested in research approaches and the rest as they say...

### ***Pre-Propositional Knowing***

Rogers (in Kirschenbaum and Henderson. 1990: 270) recognises the way we can form our ideas before structuring them when he writes,

the human organism when operating freely and nondefensively, is perhaps the best scientific tool in existence and is able to sense a pattern long before it can consciously formulate one.

Similarly Moustakas embraces the concept of tacit knowledge and illustrates this with the notion that we understand the ‘treeness’ of a tree and can, therefore envisage the whole of the tree when we can only see a part of it. (Moustakas, 1990)

During research group 1 we identified a stage where we built up knowledge of the research subject before we considered studying it. We termed this ‘pre-propositional knowing’ in adding to the co-operative experiential model (Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002, appendix 3; Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004, appendix 1). This idea fits with the notion that researchers’ interest in a subject is often fuelled by a personal experience and a desire to understand what it means to them (as echoed by Ellis& Bochner, 2000). The research is then a process of uncovering this meaning and how it was formed. This incorporates the influence of factors such as the personality of the experiencing researcher along with cultural meanings and social expectations about the way we should understand or react to the experience.

### **Pre-Propositional Knowing**

Reason and Heron (1986: 459-461) Identify four ways of knowing that are progressed through in the fulfilment of the knowledge quest. During the organic emergence process understanding will be developed that is not yet clearly identified as research findings and that the researchers are not aware of as new understanding. I refer to this understanding as ‘pre -propositional knowing’ as it is understanding that is forming before propositions are formally made.

Four kinds of knowing are progressed or cycled through as part of co-operative inquiry (see Heron, 1996: 52-57). Propositional knowing refers to knowledge as theories and statements (Reason & Heron, 1986: 458). Researchers return to and



amend this knowledge by cycling through the stages of co-operative inquiry (see literature review)

### Life Stages: Pre-propositional knowing

We felt that there had been a stage before we knew what we were researching, and therefore before we made any statements that would constitute propositional knowledge. During this time we were exchanging ideas and we later called these ‘pre-propositional knowledge’ as it was a form of knowing that came before we made formal propositions. I see this as different to experiential knowing in that we were not only ‘imaging and feeling the presence’ (Heron, 1996: 52) of the phenomenon but had shaped ideas about it, for example we talked about our parents making changes to family homes which we recognised as a stage in our lives where we were being encouraged to ‘fly the nest’ and therefore become independent. We had developed a group understanding about the nature of the life stage we felt we were in and had drawn attention within our group to the significance of the events we were experiencing but we had not yet described this as a ‘life stage’.

The following groups also showed the presence of knowledge that was not just the experience of something but the ability to share this experience having processed it and developed an understanding of it. During the period of organic emergence where we were building this pre-propositional knowing we were employing some

of the techniques discussed later in this chapter such as artwork, the hot-seat, drawing life maps, illustrating our names as a way of showing who we were, along with conversation and simply being together. Techniques were offered to the group but they were declined at least as often as taken up showing the influence of facilitators' greater knowledge of the approach did not compromise the democratic nature of the process. Student members often put forward the ideas about activities we could use to build the group relationship and share something about ourselves, for example one suggestion that we should write our fears and wishes and put them into the centre of our circle anonymously and then guess who had written each one and another where we each wrote a question which we put in a 'hat' and then we each drew a question to answer. Such activities resulted in the pre-propositional knowing as described below.

- In group two we talked about a sense of feeling at one with a place or a person without referring to these experiences as connections. We had an understanding of our personal story and the meaning it held for us and went through a personal process of creating the story as we told it to the group (discussed later). Our pre-propositional knowing was individual (level one) whereas our resulting understanding was collaborative (level two).
- Group three did not progress to recognising a subject for inquiry. I now wonder whether we never left a stage of pre-propositional knowing because we did not become aware of what that knowledge was in not identifying our focus.
- Conversations in group four revolved around relationships outside the research group before we focused on the topic of 'relatedness' which

became about a sense of relatedness in the group. The way in which we stated our individual understanding of our relatedness outside the group represented pre-propositional knowing.

- Group five researched trust and although I was not a part of this group I worked with most of the co-researchers the previous year in a similar way. If, as I and a member of the group propose, the choice of topic resulted from the earlier incarnation of the group, the understanding resulting from that earlier group represents pre-propositional knowing where co-researchers formulated some understanding of trust, or rather the lack of it.
- When researching ‘learning’ (group six) pre-propositional knowing took the form of individual understanding as individual co-researchers understood and explained their own anxieties and motivations on a pre-propositional level. The co-operative research process allowed us to identify commonalities and differences in these anxieties and motivations within the group.
- Group seven researched family, with the resulting understanding being about the way parents ‘made us who we are’. Our identification of the importance of family was pre-propositional knowing established when we noted that we had all brought items in for ‘show and tell’ that represented our relationships with family members.

I openly take the idea of engaging with a subject for inquiry from heuristic research, however I use this terminology as a result of my own research having found it sums up this stage of a study. Moustakas (1990: 15) refers to the process of ‘identifying with the focus of inquiry’ which he explains as, ‘getting inside the question’. So

my engaging with the subject for inquiry is similar to and is inspired by Moustakas' wording of a similar concept but I see it as a slightly different process. Where identifying with the focus for inquiry is about seeking further into the phenomenon to reach a focus through considering it from other perspectives (or Salk's 'the inverted perspective' discussed by Moustakas, 1990: 1516). I see engaging with a subject for inquiry as a process that would happen prior to this as it is about identifying the phenomenon which is under investigation (the investigation having already begun as an emerging process resulting in pre-propositional knowledge).

### ***Tacit Knowing and Intuition***

I fuse the heuristic process of identifying with the focus of inquiry with the heuristic phase of initial engagement where a question of intense interest is encouraged into consciousness (Moustakas, 1990: 27). This idea of encouraging the focus 'into consciousness' through tacit knowing and intuition (discussed below and in chapter 3), resonates with my concept of organic emergence, which is allowing the subject for inquiry to emerge as part of the process.

Polanyi (1966: 4) describes tacit knowledge as, 'we can know more than we can tell'. Moustakas (1990: 21) refers to tacit knowing as involving the knowledge of the whole by understanding the parts and uses the example of the tree; that in knowing the trunk, the branches, the leaves, flowers, textures, colours and so on we understand the 'treeness of a tree'. My vision of research is that we can start with what we know, for example the tree, and our inquiry is then about how we know that, for example we know it is a tree because it has branches and leaves. Before

inquiring we know a tree has branches and leaves but becoming aware of this understanding is what makes it research.

Intuition is the bridge between the implicit tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge which is observable and describable (Moustakas, 1990). This description makes me think about the notion discussed above; that we start from what we know and work back to how we know it. So my approach to research is about using intuition. I would agree with this but it does not seem to give me an explanation of what is actually happening. Moustakas writes (1990: 23)

one can view a tree from many angles, sides, front, and back; but one cannot see the whole tree. The whole tree must be intuited from the clues that are provided by careful observation, experience, and connecting the parts and subtleties of the tree into patterns and relationships that ultimately enable an intuitive knowing of the tree as a whole.

As with heuristic research hermeneutic philosophy recognises tacit knowledge or knowledge of 'the whole' as an important element of understanding, and includes the notion of intuition as somehow providing a 'leap' in understanding. Palmer (1969) in reference to Schliermacher's explanation of the hermeneutic circle discusses 'pre-knowledge' as a 'minimum level for leaping' (p84).

### Life Stages: Tacit knowing and intuition

The majority of co-researchers in the life stages group were of a similar age and about to leave university so at a point of change in their lives; significant in that we were about to leave education, an institution we had spent most of our lives being guided by. We were aware of being at a time of change but the activities during our first phase of research allowed us to identify the factors which constituted the sense we had of being at a time of change. Intuition developed during activities such as conversation and creative approaches and we became aware of 'life stages' as the encompassing theme or the tacit whole binding the conversations we had and the focus we seemed to keep returning to. Hence the feeling of 'yes that's it' when we identified the focus. We were then able to explore the 'parts', such as the move from being the responsibility of our parents to being responsible for ourselves, which made up this sense of change and our interest in the notion of 'life stages'.

In reflecting on my research process I see that my pre-propositional knowing formed as an undergraduate. There are times when I feel I have not researched or identified anything through this PhD study that I had not recognised before formally embarking on it. On reflection I realise that this is due to my resulting model being the imaging of the felt sense I had about research during the formative stages of my inquiry. This study is essentially a lived inquiry (Heron, 1998) and results are not about the identification of new ideas, but a deepened understanding, and identification of what I already knew on a tacit level. It is the uncovering, extending and description

of this felt sense that is the discovery and that creates new understanding. In reflecting on her undergraduate study one co-researcher similarly reports,

Although I sometimes may not be able to put my finger on what part of the behaviour was bullying; I simply know that it was.

The initial model of inquiry was the outcome of my pre-propositional knowing; as such it is a proposition. This was informed by my immersion in my own introspective studies and my experiences in collaborative research groups and my engaging with co-researchers reports (appendix 6). I have reflected on this through engagement with the process of research and I reflect on it here in outlining the resulting model.

So as we float through an ‘un-prescriptive’ process as I have liked to think of it – what do we actually *do* in conducting our research? I can answer this question only in terms of what I have done both individually and as part of a group. It is worth highlighting that my research has involved a large number of co-researchers (large I can estimate at 80 if I exclude the idea of the authors of published work being co-researchers and so I would consider this large for the subjective nature of the study) and the practices I outline seem to have worked for these co-researchers too as I have understood from their reports and conversations with them.

## **Phase 2 - Research Practices**

### ***Reading***

After realising what we are researching it seems we head for the library to find out what ‘studies’ have been done and what ‘findings’ have been concluded. While this

may seem like an attempt to gain an objective picture of the phenomenon, I find reading an introspective process. I cannot read even a 'very academic' piece without it making me think about my own experiences and consider my own thoughts and assumptions. This whole issue is discussed in more depth with regards to the outputs from research but for me reading is a tool for inquiry as it is an important way in which we develop our understanding. Ideas come to me when I am reading even if they are not explicitly related to what the author is discussing.

Reading about somebody else's experience makes you think about your own in the same way as I discuss in relation to conversation below. Thinking about the way somebody else understands an experience sheds a new light on your own or may remind you of elements of an experience you had forgotten. When using other researchers' reports I often take quotes (see appendix 4) but this is about noting what interests me; what resonates rather than being about identifying themes. I also find that writing down somebody else's words helps me to understand them.

Perhaps writing them in my own hand makes them a part of my experience (so their level three output becomes part of my level one understanding and writing their words helps me understand their story subjectively as it 'makes' it my subjective experience and understanding).

My reading in relation to this study has involved exploration of academic literature but reading for pleasure can also become a process where I begin to think about the research. For example in reading 'Why be Happy, When you Could be Normal' (Winterson, 2011) I find myself thinking about my parent's influence on my approach to research (see final reflection, chapter 10). My engagement with undergraduate dissertations has also been through reading and I find the authors'



experiences merge with my own as I absorb them; there is no specific process of note taking and collation that I could make explicit here but I discuss this as an empathic process in considering the representation of research and hermeneutic theory. Thus the process of 'analysis' is through an engagement with a text; the process being the movement from one person's level three process (the communication of their understanding) to another person's level one understanding (in their absorbing the experience as their own in their interpretation) This is explained further in the level three section below.

### Life Stages: The role of literature

In engaging with the fictional and biographical literature that we felt was relevant to our study of life stages we read through the lens of our 'life stages' focus. In turn our reading influenced our understanding of life stages. We were not reading passively but interacting with the text in picking up ways in which the story confirmed or opposed the assumptions and statements we made in our group. We shared the elements of the texts we had found interesting with the group through conversation and moved the way these outside stories had influenced our understanding as a level one (individual) process to a level two process when we shared our understanding and developed this as described in the section on conversation.

## ***Writing***

For me writing is not just about telling and ‘mopping up’ at the end of a study (Richardson, 1994: 923). I find that, like when I read, I have moments of inspiration when I write and it is not always related to what I am actually writing about at the time. In writing things *down* (as if pulling some flighty ideas from the sky and grounding them), and particularly when you mean them to be read, ideas can be put into a clearer form. In researching work apnoea writing has been my primary method, it is a very introspective study and in writing I unravel some of my feelings (see chapter 8). I don’t really know why I feel the way I do until I write it down and the paper and pen (or computer and keyboard) act like a therapist just reflecting my thoughts until I reach my own conclusions. This deepens my understanding which in turn furthers the research – this is the ‘re-searching’, in that I see subjective research as being about discovering the nature of something that is known rather than generating new knowledge in an orthodox sense.

One undergraduate explains,

In vocalising my thoughts (my stories), I believe that I was trying to mediate an internal process... In telling my story, I am, in effect, reliving my experience and explaining my findings. Vocalising my thoughts has been one of the most problematic issues whilst conducting this study, and so telling my story was a great way of making me think deeper and reassess my ideas and beliefs before delivering them to someone else.

In the seventh research group, after focusing on the broad topic of ‘family’ we decided we would like a way of hearing each group member’s story. We elected to write individual depictions (Moustakas 1990) on our experiences of family which would be given to the rest of the group to read. Many of the co-researchers reported that this was so we could maintain some form of

anonymity in telling our story but in reality it was clear who had written each particular depiction as we had shared many of the experiences we wrote about in previous conversations. Not only this but before writing the depictions we had all been in agreement that we would probably be able to tell who had written each one. This made me think about why it was that writing allowed us to share thoughts that we did not want to 'say out loud with all the group looking at me' as one co-researcher phrased it.

Writing allows for the mediation of the story (in a more calculated way than the telling of it in conversation) and allows for self-censorship but also greater disclosure through giving the writer the power to share it or not share it as and when they are satisfied it both says enough but does not expose that which they do not want to share. In addition writing is a process of self-dialogue and perhaps as the quote above illustrates this is a process of making clear your thoughts, without interruptions from people around you, even if it is only your perception of their reaction to the story which is distractive. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Richardson (2000) suggest it is a voyage of discovery when we set ourselves free from certain writing constraints, certainly in the group situation described above there were more constraints related to how much of our story we shared in the group through conversation that when given the space allowed through writing.

In the group I refer to here there were certainly 'restrictions' placed on disclosure through feelings of 'attention seeking', accusations of 'attention seeking' and an acceptance of feelings as something you 'put up with' and 'got on with' which reflected the way the co-researchers talked about their early

family lives in terms of having no choice but to live with the family and the life you were given (it is important to note that these are my reflections on our conversations). In this situation, and for this group of co-researchers I feel the writing of a personal story allowed the freedom to explore subjective experience and understanding honestly and without guilt about undervaluing the positive aspects of their upbringing (co-researchers, often in referring to the negative implications of growing up without their biological fathers in the home, would emphasise the quality of their mothers' parenting). Co-researchers with perceived happier early family lives were also able to explore their experience of family without feelings of guilt about the way this impacted upon those who did not experience this.

### Life Stages: Writing as shaping individual understanding

It was not until our time together had concluded that we each began to write individually about the findings and the experience of the group research. In the reports were summaries of our findings and observations about our process that had not been shared during our sessions. On working with these reports to write the group paper (appendix 1) I realised the richness of the insight in each of these individual reports. From these reports I was able to form the picture of our process and the way this resulted in our findings as discussed in the published paper (appendix 1). This led me to believe that it would have been beneficial to write and share accounts during the active research phase as the writing process had proved a valuable level one

inquiry where new insights were reached individually which could have been further enhanced by sharing them with the group. In subsequent groups I suggested writing up our understanding as individuals to share with the group at an appropriate point in the research (this took the form of letters to the group or individual depictions). This was useful in hearing the voice of each member of the group and in identifying the emerging theory.

### ***Conversation and Storytelling***

Even an individual inquiry is influenced by other people and there is a collaborative element in that thoughts are influenced by conversations with other people. Fellow researchers and research supervisors offered me the chance to try out and work through ideas often adding dimensions especially in the form of “well have you read this persons research” and “that sounds very like this kind of research” or “have you noticed the way you...”. Friends and relations lent a ‘real world’ ear when I tried to describe academic concepts and relate what I think are experiences particular to academic work to their own lives and careers, for example my mother-in-law agreed very enthusiastically with my understanding of ‘work apnoea’ describing how it was a problem for her in areas of her job as a social worker. A friend who is a health visitor was able to understand some of my propositions about how my model could be used to research her practice and highlighted the aspects of reflexivity she already employs in her role.

Even when I am not talking about my research, conversations that may seem very unrelated focus my thinking or make me consider the way we understand things as human beings, for example a friend may say, “well he would think that because his mother always used to...” which makes me think of the way a friend, who is in no way academic, processes the reasons behind a person’s behaviour and their interpretation of a situation, although without the reflexive reasoning that this interpretation is influenced by a variety of factors such as the penetration of psychological and psychoanalytic ideas into cultural reasoning about behaviour. Hearing about somebody else’s experience informs me as it is additional ‘data’ for my research but also makes me think about my own reaction to that story and my own experience and so gives me more understanding about myself, facilitating a process of analysis.

Throughout the collaborative research groups our predominant method of inquiry has been conversation. We would talk about what we had been doing between our sessions, share stories about our past and our families and discuss television programmes we had watched or news stories we had heard. Although this may seem like everyday life rather than research it is through these conversations that subjects for inquiry have emerged and been explored. The subject of our conversations illustrates what concerns and interests a certain group of people, in a certain situation, from a certain culture, in a certain time. We have found that when one person tells a story it can spark off a memory for another member of the group, another may think of something that happened to a friend or that they read about, a film they saw and so on. So conversation helped to uncover experiences and understanding which gave us ‘data’ to work with. It is important to note that the

group members' approach to listening greatly affects this process and can increase or thwart the level of disclosure, inherent in which is the way either more understanding can be surfaced through the right environment (the facilitation of introspective process) or it can be submerged, overlooked or forgotten; being perceived as of no interest to others or carrying the risk of exposure and judgement. This is discussed in relation to the climate for growth later in this chapter.

Conversation also acted as a form of analysis because we were thinking about one another's experiences and processing them according to our own experiences and checking this as a group through sharing our understanding. As Cottle (2002: 535) writes,

in truth, we tend to hear another's story with our own stories, our lenses, as it were, shaping and refining the content and tone of what we are encountering.

We would check our understanding of a co-researcher's story as we responded using phrases such as, 'it's like when'; 'I know what you mean'; 'I didn't really mean'; 'Yeh, it's like'; 'I don't understand because'; 'I don't think it's like that'; 'am I right in thinking'. Whether we agreed or disagreed, had similar experiences or opposing ones different stories and ways of understanding the phenomenon in question would filter our ideas and deepen our understanding. In group two we struggled to synthesise our experiences into one way of encapsulating the experience of connectedness; for some of us a connection was a spiritual feeling, for others it was about emotional *ties* to people which may be negative or positive. Through our conversations we absorbed each other's understanding of connections which developed our own understanding and in turn created a group understanding.

I have recognised a process similar to Wilkins' (2000a: 144) model of storytelling in research:

- The telling of an individual, personal story as an intra-psychic process
- The mediation of the story through writing a journal, painting a picture etc.
- The more public re-telling of that story, where it is modified by the input and influence of others
- Recasting the personal story in the light of the previous stages and pre-existing stories (which may include anecdotes or literature) and the production of an encapsulating account.
- The synthesis of a group story from all the personal stories in such a way that all feel 'this is our story – I see myself and my colleagues in it'.

In conversation we would:

- Think about an experience individually which may have come to our minds because of something said by another member of the group.
- Tell this story to the group, and their response would amend it.
- The co-researchers' stories (their personal experiences or those they have heard elsewhere) will give the individual a new understanding of the phenomenon being discussed.
- As we have held this conversation as a group we develop an understanding that is shared and which includes each individual experience.



This also reflects the way Silverstone, (1993) summarises the use of methods from art therapy. I wonder the extent to which I am influenced by my own model of research in my interpretation and how much my recognition of the processes described here influenced my model. Then I realise that this matters less than the fact that my experience and interpretation and the theories of others are mirrored, as this affirms the understanding.

### Life Stages: Conversation as data and analysis

Conversation was our main ‘method’ of inquiry and formed much of the first phase of our research where we allowed the focus to emerge, as well as being a way of inquiring once we had established our interest in life stages. Out of our personal stories we were able to make propositions about the way in which they exemplified more common experience. An example follows:

One week, as Christmas was beginning to approach, Paul was contributing to our usual discussions about the events of the week and the things that were happening in the coming days. He made a statement to the effect of, “I suppose I will need to ring my father and arrange the family getting together”. He went on to explain how he had noticed the role of ringing round the family seemed to have passed from his father to him. Although younger, the rest of the group recognised this shift in family roles and our conversation developed through Paul’s sense of increasing responsibility for the wider family,

and projection about how his responsibility for his father might grow, to the rest of the members of the group reflecting on small changes in the balance of responsibility in their families. One co-researcher spoke about a concern for her parent's financial situation and during the process of considering how our personal responsibilities might change we began formulating our propositions about stages of responsibility (see chapter 7).

### ***The Hot Seat***

In ways this is different to the other research practices explained in this chapter as it is something I have only used in group research. It does, however, warrant a place here because it was an interesting practice and particularly in group four it was an important part of our process.

There is an empty chair in the middle of the group circle ready to be taken by any member of the group who feels ready. This is a concept (or rather a title as the actual activity was quite different) borrowed from psychodrama (the title coming from Perls' adaptation of Moreno's 'empty chair' see Leveton, 2001). Our use of the hot-seat was for interviewing one another rather than forms of psychodrama or role play. We agreed that we could ask any question that we wanted but that the person in the chair was not obliged to give an answer. Each group member took it in turns to ask a question to the person in the hot-seat. Questions did not always relate directly to the subject of our inquiry but the way in which they enhanced our understanding of the person in the hot-seat developed our understanding of their experiences.

The hot-seat had a great impact on personal growth and the climate of the group. Often very personal and emotional issues were shared which is illustrative of the fact that the climate encouraged sharing. Co-researchers reported that this was a process of self-exploration and group-building. One co-researcher reflected, “Through learning about others a strong urge arose within me to want to allow others to learn about me”. This highlights the mutual disclosure that has been a key feature of the research groups. In groups there is often an imbalance in terms of the amount that people speak, this is part of the dynamics as I have experienced them rather than a problem, but the hot-seat gives a space for all group members to contribute equally. We even found the actual questions we asked were interesting as co-researchers reported that they often asked the questions they wanted to be asked themselves.

As the above quote illustrates the hot-seat process made co-researchers much more open in sharing their experiences. This resulted in a deepened understanding of the subject we were researching, for example in group four the hot-seat highlighted the way we had understood one another through the questions we asked which were tailored to the person in the hot-seat. Essentially this meant that we were not only asking about the person in the hot-seat but also (and often explicitly) telling them how we understood them; in their answering what time in history they would like to have lived in we would respond, ‘oh I would see you living in...’ or confirm our understanding of them with, ‘oh yes, that’s what I thought you would say’. Our output was in part a list of the characters that made up the group as animals, representing this understanding and felt sense of each individual member of the

group. An account of the hot-seat made up of co-researcher comments is provided in appendix 7).

### Life Stages: The hot-seat interview

Having devised some research questions (which concerned the cultural and gender specific nature of life-stages which we later decided were not particularly relevant to our study and our experience) we decided the hot-seat would be a good way of interviewing each group member. We approached this as described above; with each member taking a turn in the hot-seat and the rest of the group taking it in turns to ask them a question of their choosing. The importance of this activity was the opportunity to immerse fully in one co-researcher's experience. Questions related to our experiences growing up and to how we saw our lives in the future. We recorded the 'interviews' but never used these tapes, instead finding we analysed what had been discussed through conversation, for example we had all spoken about our first day at school sparking a conversation about this a significant phase. We noted experiences we had in common or that were of interest; which were often about our childhood and our feeling of moving into adulthood.

### ***Creativity***

The experience of using the 'creative connection' (N.Rogers, 2000) as an undergraduate and later at conferences and in group projects has provided me with a

way of sorting out my thoughts and identifying them when I am not quite sure what they are. In groups we 'do' the creation in whatever form it takes and then share with the group what we feel elements of the creation represent. Often it is only when I talk about how the creation represents my experience that I understand it myself and the same is true when I use creativity for an individual subjective inquiry.

My three stage model of research took form when I was sat with chalks and a big piece of paper trying to organise my thoughts. I began with an oval shape, I don't know why but this seemed right and it was blue. I think I was trying to map out what the different areas of research I was studying might have in common and it became an illustration of how they relate. This gave me a vision of how research could operate for me and how it had operated already in the projects I had been involved in. In effect I have worked backwards from this point to explore this vision and understand the different stages and how they work and interact. At the time I don't think I knew what some of the coloured swirls were but things became clearer (and yet messier) as the research progressed. If I cannot find the right word to describe a process or I have difficulty in structuring my ideas I will use this technique of 'doodling' with crayons or chalks and seeing what happens. I feel creative expression facilitates a state of openness where ideas and feelings can come into consciousness. Meekums (1993: 131) writes,

The act of creation incorporates a state of stillness during which insights occur, and which is usually preceded and followed by a state of striving and action.

One undergraduate co-researcher reflects,

Being relaxed allowed my mind to wander, and in turn my pieces became more creative, thus allowing for the possibility of more of my knowledge to emerge, from the tacit to the conscious.

The above reflection on the relationship between creativity and tacit knowledge echoes my own experience and understanding of this.

Initially my interest in creativity was as a means to exploring felt understanding that was unexplainable, as we have found useful in the collaborative research groups. I was interested in a practical application of creative work to facilitate, almost the ‘data gathering’ of the research.

My understanding of the importance of the creative process has developed in reflecting on my research and I now see that it is fundamental element of my model as creativity opens the mind in a way that allows for tacit understanding and illumination, not only when creating one’s own research outputs but also when engaging with another person’s communication of their understanding (see below). Moustakas (1990) refers to a receptive state he terms ‘focusing’. In imagining the world of the other there is a creative process.

I now see the ‘state of stillness’ Meekums (1993: 131) refers to as being facilitated by creative work but also by reading and writing, relaxation and movement, and even when simply taking the space to think and let the mind wander, for example I find ideas will come to me when horse riding or driving the car. In theories of creativity there is also the recognition of the importance of activity and rest to facilitate a process akin to Moustakas’ immersion and incubation allowing for illumination, for example Poincaré’s four sages of creativity (Boden, 1990) and

Parlett's 'illuminative evaluation' (Parlett, 1981). The reflection of this process points to the importance of this 'state of stillness'.

Silverstone (1993: 131-132) outlines four stages of art therapy:

- The image manifests itself within the person;
- The person externalises the image through paint or clay;
- There is a dialogue with the therapist (in the case of group research with other group members), so the meaning may become known on a conscious level;
- It may become necessary to work on the revealed meaning.

In the collaborative research groups we have used a process akin to that explained above. This has proved an effective way of uncovering meaning and focusing our research. For example, in group two we used creative expression frequently as we were working with experiences that were very hard to explain. Through drawing we could explore the felt sense of experience on an intrapersonal level before developing our understanding with the group as we discussed the meaning of our work. This resulted in our distinguishing between the different feelings of bonds, ties and connections. I often find that I do not know why I have used certain colours or forms until I explain it to other people. This inner exploration allows for new understanding that contributes to the resulting understanding.

### Life Stages: Creativity

We used creative approaches in the early stages of our research, including drawing the group and ourselves in the group. This was part of the process of organic emergence where we used creativity as a group building exercise to learn more about one another.

On establishing the focus for the research we drew 'life maps' to clarify our individual understanding of life stages and share this with one another (thus moving inquiry between levels one and two). This included our lives to that date but also projections about the future which gave us the space to explore our hopes and our fears. The creative approach embodied the theory I now put forward about personal growth as a research tool, as this process enabled personal growth through encouraging introspection and a focus on the individual experience while developing the research through uncovering experiences and the meaning we attributed to them.

### ***Research Climate and Personal Growth.***

An important process in the development of understanding in the studies discussed in this thesis is personal growth. This is something I began to think about when I was writing up the experience of my first collaborative research group as we agreed that personal growth was one of the outcomes of our study. Out of the same inquiry Wilkins (2000) went on to consider how research can



have a ‘developmental’ outcome rather than one (or in addition to one) that is informative or transformative. In collating members’ experiences of this group I became interested in how personal growth deepens the level of understanding of an experience that can be shared with the group, this became the focus of a paper (Mitchell-Williams et al 2004, appendix 1). I see the process of personal growth as working in the same way in individual subjective inquiries. It is evident that introspective research changes the researcher on a personal level and does not just provide academic learning. As one co-researcher reports,

I know this study will have an effect on me for years to come and it will continue to be a source of inspiration for me.

Another states, “Having made a discovery, the researcher can never see the world again as before.”

Those familiar with the personal benefits of introspective research may openly and intentionally seek a personally developmental outcome. One co-researcher remarks, ‘I wanted to know and understand loneliness and therefore resolve my fear of it’.

This personal development also plays a part in autoethnography perhaps in part due to empowerment from being allowed to express yourself, as Wall (2006: 3) states, “It says that what I know matters”. In discussing the difference in approach to more conventional methods Wall further illustrates the impact the research has in talking about the practice of writing in different and more creative forms,

I suspect it is precisely the fact that I am forced to bend in a new way that is the reason behind the growth I see in myself. (2006: 4)

When reflecting on my own undergraduate dissertation I considered how I had learnt so much as a result of my research from people I had spent a lot of time with socially over the years. I wondered what had facilitated a new depth of understanding and I believe it was my engagement with their story and their perception of my interest in it. Beyond this was the way in which they were treated as the expert and they felt they were informing me giving them confidence to explore their experience. In the same way I think that this concentration on and acceptance of personal feeling as knowledge can be applied to yourself in an individual inquiry. I know from experience (present as much as past) that one's own opinion feels least credible, perhaps because of ingrained ideas about subjectivity invalidating research, but it is crucial to the effectiveness of a research venture that is intentionally subjective to have faith in the worth of your own story.

Personal growth is not just a bi-product of subjective and collaborative research. It could be considered a valid outcome, as Heron (1996: 101) writes, "anything written down is secondary and subsidiary" to that which is contained within persons. I believe that personal growth is also an important process in conducting research. Personal growth is beneficial to the content of the research because as the co-researcher learns more about themselves they can share something new with the group. Co-researchers from all of the collaborative inquiry groups I have discussed here have reported the importance of personal growth in relation to their lives:

The time within the group has provided a vital learning process and elements of empowerment which will stick with me for the rest of my life

There is also a benefit for the group;

There is a sense that in our knowing and discovery of ourselves we are able to let go or allow part of that as a contribution to the group process

If we are evaluating research in terms of an outcome that is more than personal development then personal growth certainly enhances the product, and indeed provides content.

Rogers (1961) discusses what characterises a process of becoming ‘that self which one truly is’. He explains these characteristics as a movement in a direction; ‘Away from facades, away from pleasing others, toward self-direction, toward being process, toward being complexity, toward openness to experience, toward acceptance of others, toward trust of self’ and describes this general direction thus:

It seems to me that the individual moves toward *being*, knowingly and acceptingly, the process which he inwardly and actually *is*. He moves away from being what he is not, from being a façade. He is not trying to be more than he is, with the attendant feelings of insecurity or bombastic defensiveness. He is not trying to be less than he is, with the attendant feelings of guilt or self-depreciation. He is increasingly listening to the deepest recesses of his physiological and emotional being, and finds himself increasingly willing to be, with greater accuracy and depth, that self which he most truly is.” (p175)

It strikes me that in subjective and intersubjective inquiry, rather than a need for objectivity there is a need to, to the greatest possible extent, ‘be that self which one truly is’ and for the individual to be aware of their experiences in a congruent manner; for the actual experience to be accurately represented self –awareness

(Rogers, 1957). This is not about reaching *the* truth about self and experience in research but about striving towards a goal of openness and awareness, which allows for the exploration of the self and experience which can be shared as part of the research endeavour. I believe this enhances authenticity and trustworthiness.

Personal growth and therefore disclosure is facilitated by the climate of the group as one co-researcher expresses;

Due to these bonds developing as time progressed more people began to express more in depth self-disclosures and I believe there was a general group unconscious rule that each member felt that whatever was disclosed would not only be kept in confidence within our circle but would also be accepted

The climate grows through the communication of Rogers' (1957) necessary and sufficient conditions and through activities such as creative work and the hot-seat;

The hot-seat was all three – accelerating, trust building and self-disclosing.  
We were catapulted onto another level after doing it.

In realising the impact of personal growth and wanting to establish the process through which this might occur I returned to Rogers' (1957) influential paper, "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Therapeutic Personality Change". In this paper Rogers asserts that there are six conditions to the counselling relationship that are necessary and sufficient to facilitate positive personality change for the client. I have considered the relevance the six outlined conditions may have for research.

(Rogers' 1957:96 words appear in bold type,). *The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Person Centred Research...*

- 1) **Two persons are in psychological contact.** I would add 'or more' to relate to the group situation and I also wonder about the relevance for individual inquiry; could psychological contact apply to the reader and the writer of a text? Also can a person be in psychological contact with themselves in a way which characterises a readiness to explore their experiences? I recognise times of psychological contact where I have been more aware of my experiences and more able to be reflexive, and others where I almost lose the reflexive quality which could be characterised as losing an element of psychological contact with myself.
- 2) **The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.** Incorporated below.
- 3) **The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent, or integrated in the relationship.**

Some members may be taking the client position and some may take that of the therapist. All members will move between the two and as a group there is development towards a congruent and integrated climate which facilitates personal growth. The way in which each individual moves between congruence and incongruence is also true of individual inquiry where there may be a kind of 'devil versus angel' argument between the parts of the researcher that are able to be open and honest about their thoughts and experiences and other parts where there is a discrepancy between the actual experience and the way the researcher wishes to portray it according to their self-image (referring to Roger's description of incongruence 1957: 222). Rather than vulnerability and anxiety there are perhaps parallels in not knowing or not being aware (as an

equivalent to being vulnerable) and a curiosity or a desire to know (as an equivalent to anxiety).

- 4) **The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.** In a group setting an ability to apply and display UPR develops for members allowing them to facilitate sharing and growth for one another. I feel that a researcher learns to consider their own experiences and thoughts with a level of UPR, for example in exploring my 'work apnoea' (chapter 8) I needed to accept reasons for my inability to work rather than just thinking of myself as lazy and useless.
- 5) **The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client.** Empathy is important in research groups in understanding the stories we engage with. To understand 'as if' we were the experiencing person allows us to understand the story from the frame of reference of the experiencing person. I later discuss the way the story becomes part of our own experience.
- 6) **The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding is to a minimal degree achieved.** Conveying empathic understanding to a co-researcher encourages them to share their story which contributes to the research outcome, it also facilitates their personal growth which is beneficial to the research, the group climate, and could be considered (for example see Heron 1996:104-108 & Wilkins 2000b: 20) the research outcome, but will also increase the quality of informative outcomes.

In group inquiries we not only learnt about our capacity to trust and share with others but also learnt about our ability to offer acceptance, empathy and congruence to encourage others to share and to trust us. We all played the part of both therapist and client: at times we were in a state of incongruence, feeling vulnerable and anxious and at times we were congruent, feeling genuine and integrated in the relationship and truly ourselves. We all tried to engage with one another empathically, offer unconditional positive regard and we tried to communicate these feelings with our co-researchers. With Wilkins (Wilkins and Mitchell-Williams, 2002: 295) I wrote,

When co-researchers experience themselves to be deeply understood and accepted by authentic co-researchers, however naïve, wild or silly they may fear their views to be, they are likely to be encouraged further in their explorations and so to offer more of the totality of their experience.

Wilkins (2010) claims that the added depth the person centred approach allows contributes to the trustworthiness of a study through the contextualisation of the experiencing person's story giving co-researchers an understanding of the individual's view point. The extent to which the person centred conditions are achieved affects the climate of the group and the level of our disclosures. From group four one co-researcher writes,

This level of acceptance by everyone, even in terms of their negative aspects, gave everyone the freedom to be themselves and not have to put on 'a front' with regards to who they were. It was also apparent that everyone was listened to with everyone else's undivided attention

Whereas from group two there is a report;

It seemed that the group could only reply and echo experiences from their own frame of reference. This disheartened the group, because every time

somebody expressed their story it would be followed by another story from another member of the group

Although sharing stories is a way of reflecting on what we have heard there was a feeling in this group that we were not being listened to. This shows the difficult balance between being empathic but aware of our own interpretations, and only hearing another person's experience in relation to one's own.

From the start of group three there were two areas we failed to address which I believe created a barrier to our process and our research. Firstly we did not commit to any particular way of working together rejecting or not picking up on suggestions made. One member in particular would say she did not want to work creatively or do the kind of group building exercises she had experienced previously on the course. At the time I felt she was being resistant to experiential work and did not want to enter into a deep or emotional relationship with the group. I now wonder whether she simply wanted to do something different and it was the specific activities (such as creative approaches I detail below) that she was 'bored of' rather than the idea of working with the group. We did not really question why she was resistant to certain ideas showing, certainly on my part a lack of congruence and unwillingness to be open with my concerns.

The fear of challenging one another was also a barrier when one portion of the group felt that two of the co-researchers did not interact in the right way in the group. They were not familiar with person centred practices and had not worked in an encounter situation before. They would fill silences talking about what they did last night and laughing, it seemed between themselves. There was a certain element of 'us' and 'them' as the rest of us were allied to a particular strand of the course



and we presumed our interaction would be, to some extent, person centred as we had all developed this way of working. Without making anything clear we expected two members of the group who were not familiar with this way of working to take this approach. We did not raise this issue and interaction became uncomfortable; the less we responded to their stories, the more they filled the silences. We did draw attention to literature on the person centred approach one week and we addressed how we were feeling; it was clear that the two co-researchers had not understood the way we had presumed we would work.

I feel that one large problem in this group was a lack of acceptance. We made judgements about what co-researchers wanted from our time together and did not create a climate for growing individually or as a group. It was actually one of the co-researchers we saw as failing to engage with the group who opened up the most during our time together and I felt I understood her the most by the end of our inquiry. For me the subject of this inquiry was acceptance and difference but it took me nearly five years to see this and it is very much an individual reflection. The difficulties in the group process had the potential to become the research and have certainly been developmental in my own learning and in terms of the understanding that contributes to this study but the complexities in addressing problems within the group raises questions about the applicability of this model, particularly when a more specific and practical outcome is necessary (discussed in chapter 9).

My experience in groups has allowed me to realise that to embrace the research process as fluid and reliant on processes such as personal growth, all co-researchers need to understand the ways of working that will facilitate this. One difficulty seems to be when the group does not create the climate for growth. In group three

this thwarted the research process and in group seven it hindered the research process. Reports from group three also point to problems in the relationship affecting co-researchers' willingness to share their experiences with the group.

As a result of the research in group seven we arrived at a deep level of understanding about our own and other people's experiences of family but the potential within this research group was vast and it took us until the late stages of our time together to reach a level of communication which facilitated the depth of exploration of our own and other people's experiences. In the case of this particular group none of the co-researchers had worked in this way before; they had no experience of person centred or experiential and reflective practices. For me this raises questions about the approach. If personal growth is to be used as a tool for inquiry it requires all co-researchers to be willing and able to enter into self-reflection.

An initiating researcher or facilitator needs to be able to guide the group, the individuals and themselves in adopting the person centred approach to research and communication that I have found to benefit the research process. Having said this I do wonder whether I am attaching a 'nice' relationship to a growthful and productive one, whereas conflict can also be a process of disclosure. In group seven there was an incident where one member of the group was labelled as an 'attention seeker' for her emotional portrayal of her experience, one co-researcher making the comment, 'I have been through exactly the same things and I'm not crying and getting everyone to pity me'. This opened up the opportunity to discuss our different experiences and interpretations of the event, our abilities to accept the

subjective experience of others and it encouraged some of the quieter members of the group to contribute their interpretations of the event in question.

My own personal growth has been a massive element of my research process. My model does not just serve as an illustration for others on how to do research, but also for myself. I have to be reminded of the processes I should reflect on in establishing how I have developed my understanding. My personal growth continues as I travel through the research process and for me there have been massive personal changes as detailed in chapter 8. I have ‘grown up’ during the course of this study, moving from student to academic (almost) and from young woman to mother and to someone who is not so young anymore! In terms of the research process it has facilitated personal growth in itself. I have moved through stages of feeling not knowledgeable enough and not intelligent enough to complete a PhD and stages where I feel energised and capable. My study of motherhood has allowed me to understand my own adaption to becoming a mother and the judgement that is part of that experience (see chapter 8). I am sure the research process has had a practical outcome in making me a better mother as reflection is a part of my everyday life and I reflect as much on my mothering practices as I do on my research practices.

My process of personal growth has allowed new insights into the research process and how I can illustrate it here in proposing a model for others to learn from. My growth in confidence and my recognition of personal struggles which have affected the research process has added another dimension to the model. This is the realisation that an elongated research process, as a result of personal or professional factors does not need to be a barrier to the research but can enhance it as breaks

from the research can be used as periods of incubation and personal life or work experiences that occur during this time can become a part of the research and a new aspect of 'data' generation.

In writing this thesis I have had to move beyond my own barriers about having my work read and judged, about making changes to the way I have worded my study, about the notion that it should be me who tends to the children and to the home. I have had to move from cowering in my image of myself as not capable of fulfilling either a motherhood or academic role to a renewed confidence in my abilities. In relation to Rogers' (1961) movement towards being 'the self which one truly is' I have moved away from 'oughts' and away from 'meeting expectations' and toward 'trust of self'. I have also moved back again and this pendulum has characterised my process of being and becoming as a researcher.

### Life Stages: Personal growth

It was when working with the reports from the life stages research group that the importance of personal growth became apparent. As a group we had recognised that there had been a developmental outcome; we felt more able to make the transition through our next life stage having explored our feelings as part of the research. When reflecting on the group and using the insights of the co-researchers I recognised the way personal growth had enabled the development of group understanding and in turn any potential informative findings.

There were direct propositions made during our time together as a result of our enhanced personal awareness. For example, exploring our anxieties about

becoming responsible for ourselves resulted in the development of the stages of responsibility. However, there was also a repeated focus on maintaining elements in our lives which did not change. The importance of this as an informative outcome was only apparent on reflection and this is discussed in chapter 7.

## *Empathy*

Empathy is the cornerstone of my research philosophy. Without empathic understanding and a belief in empathic understanding the whole theory does not work. In individual inquiry it is empathy that allows us to understand the phenomenon through another person's story. We walk in somebody else's shoes and their experience becomes part of our own and goes towards the creation of the meaning we attribute to the phenomenon.

An introspective research project is still influenced by people around us in our lives and in our work and those who write the material we read. Relying on ourselves both in research subject and method does not mean the outcome is just about our own lives and experiences but it reflects other people's and represents a synthesis of them. Witz and Bae (2011: 434) propose that in intersubjective research, the very need to understand the subjective position of another person means you need to understand them as person. The processes of getting to know one another in groups has allowed the group to understand each individual on some level. When the group inquiries seemed to work at their

best was when there was a good understanding of each member of the group.

Techniques such as the hot seat interview allow this understanding of each other. Empathy is enhanced by this process and in turn enhances the research.

In groups empathy is not only a process by which we can understand a co-researchers story but it is also a process by which we can let them know they are listened to and understood (as illustrated above regarding personal growth).

Rogers' (1957: 226) definition of empathy illustrates how applicable the process is for intersubjective research. He says empathy means, 'to sense the client's private world as if it were you own without ever losing the "as if" quality'. This highlights the engagement with another person's story, as understood from their frame of reference, but also promotes subjectivity in the retention of the 'as if' quality. As discussed below, empathy also facilitates a process of understanding when engaging with the representation of others' experiences as a level three process.

I suggest in the following sections of this chapter that empathy is part of the process of tacit knowledge and intuition and allows the 'data' around us in the form of other people's understanding, to be absorbed into our own understanding. This process is central to the notion of understanding moving through the three levels of inquiry as a transformation of meaning.

### Life Stages: Empathy

The role of empathy in the life stages research is discussed above regarding the importance of the person centred approach in our interaction. However, there was also the process of empathically engaging with texts, for example

the way the fictional literature and television programmes were referred to in trying to explain or understand meaning; one illustration being that *Ally McBeal* was discussed as a character that embodies the ‘little girl’ being present in a grown woman. It was as if a character that members of the group had engaged with empathically made the understanding of a concept more immediate.

### ***Transformation of Meaning***

Transformation of meaning is the main process running through all three levels of inquiry and essentially this is the process all other processes facilitate.

Transformation of meaning is the term I use to describe the movement of understanding from the individual experience through to the understanding that results from the inquiry. Transformation of meaning may be the movement from the individual to the collective meaning attributed to a phenomenon, it may be the transformation of meaning from the writer’s meaning to the reader’s meaning in the interaction with a written text; equally it may be the transformation of the meaning of the researched for the individual from that before a text is read to the meaning resulting once they have been influenced by the story in the text. So transformation of meaning operates at all levels of inquiry and also moves understanding through the levels; from subjective to collaborative, from collaborative to written representation, from the written piece to the subjective and all possible alternative combinations of the above.

As an undergraduate I recognised the way that during the collaborative research group much of our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation was developed through conversation. When examining this further I could identify the part each individual played in the process of our understanding and the meaning we attributed to the experience moving from individual meaning to group understanding. I explained it as follows:

Wendy tells us what happened to her over the weekend; then Zinnia waffles about how it is connected to some seemingly unrelated issue from the previous week. Paul picks up on this and makes it a little clearer, then starts introducing other elements until he himself is lost. Meanwhile Karyn is jotting down ideas wildly; at least someone will remember what we've said! Becky protests that she doesn't see how all this relates and Meabh is giving us an argument as to how all our ideas are at fault. Within this chaos is a structure for creating meaning that relies on us all and all our individual qualities, as well as our unique way of interacting. We are filtering the story through our individual experience and through our developing understanding of the research focus. Within our disputes there was a deep respect for and understanding of another's point of view. Out of one short story comes a proposition. Something we have co-created, something we all understand and 'own', collectively and individually.

(Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004: 336)

I became interested in the way meaning was transformed from the individual to the collective in group one. I recognised the importance of the process in subsequent research groups. Much of the inquiry in the group researching connectedness was about forming collective meaning from our strong individual ways of understanding the term 'connectedness'. The, at times opposing, individual meaning filtered our assumptions in the same way as illustrated above. We moved from understanding centred on our own



experience of connections with others to a collective understanding of the complexity of human connectedness and related emotions. Our conversations had allowed other people's stories to become part of our experiential understanding, contributing to our tacit, felt knowledge of feelings of connectedness in human relationships.

I had been drawn to the model of the hermeneutic circle in relation to the conversational aspect of transformation but became increasingly interested in the idea of a reader transforming a text in their reading of it; the process to which the hermeneutic circle originally referred. This fitted with the way I had found reading a subjective process both for myself and for others and helped build the argument that subjective research should be read subjectively. Meaning we attribute to phenomena is constantly changing through our reading, watching, listening, conversing and through introspection; this is the process through which understanding moves between the levels of inquiry defined by my model.

Hermeneutic theory, which originally related to textual analysis, is one I can use in understanding the transformation of meaning from experience to introspective understanding to collaborative understanding and to the written and read form; the notion of the 'horizon of the interpreter' meeting the 'horizon of the interpreted' (Geanellos, 2000: 113) being one way in which the mutual transformation of experience and the meaning attributed to it can be explained. This implies that there is some change to the 'thing that is understood' as well as the individual who understands it.

### Life Stages: Transformation of meaning

In reflecting on the life stages research I realised our conversations were more than a sharing of information and experiences; our understanding of life stages changed through our conversations. I later termed this the 'transformation of meaning' as each conversation transformed the meaning of life stages for each group member.

This process enabled the transformation of our understanding of life stages from that characterised by our early, generic, definition of life stages;

Life Stages are significant points in the past, present, or future which occur because of biological, emotional or cultural processes but of which we have an individual experience. These events tend to occur in the same order (but possibly at different times) for most people. Men and women have different experiences but nevertheless they go through equivalent stages.

It transformed into a more in depth understanding of the complexity of the transition through life stages which is discussed in chapter 7.

The way in which meaning has transformed in this study is from the sense of value for the heuristic and collaborative experiences I had as an undergraduate to an understanding of processes which had made the research experience and the outcomes so profound. The final transformation required was to communicate my understanding. My story of this third level of inquiry is included in the next section which is a return to

less structured writing. In the following chapter I illustrate the way informative findings can be achieved through a summary of the life stages work.

### ***Communicating findings with an audience: A reflexive account.***

My initial interests as a postgraduate were in subjective, collaborative and creative approaches to research using methods including introspection, drawing to uncover meaning and conversation. I was drawn to creative approaches to representing the research because I felt the outcomes from the above approaches were better ‘expressed’ than ‘explained’. This idea comes from the Reason and Hawkins (1988: 79) notion that research “can work either to explain or to express; to analyse or to understand”. My experience of using creative methods of drawing, modelling and movement as a group building and self-awareness exercise both within the university and at a conference had been enlightening and I was sure creativity could be useful in representation as well as being a method for other levels of research.

In researching motherhood I wrote a poem – presuming this to be some sort of creative synthesis that I could explain through revisiting the story leading up to this but actually it was also a representation of pre-propositional knowing, meaning it was an interim finding which I then reflected upon in considering my understanding as a product of the three levels of inquiry. This fits with my proposed research structure as being the expression of the way we understand something followed by reflection on the way this understanding has developed.

In the early stages of my research the various elements of my inquiry were still separate concerns and while I had an intuitive feeling that there were similarities in the approaches I used I did not understand how they could be synthesised into one vision of inquiry. At that time I thought of the representation of research as an end point; a way of communicating ‘findings’. When I created the original diagram that became my research model I understood that there was some kind of movement between levels but I did not identify the way in which the level three product becomes a level one inquiry for the audience.

In pursuing ways of expressing research outcomes I hunted out research reports that used a creative way of representing their findings. In journals I found articles that used poetry, (e.g. Brady, 2001, Glesne, 1997) to represent findings but I often felt I did not gain an understanding of the meanings being communicated which satisfied my curiosity. I sensed my understanding was not complete. I also felt I missed a discussion of the process leading to the creation of the poem and how the poem illustrated the author’s experience.

Wall (2006: 10) alludes to a similar feeling in reflecting on a poetic piece,

Although it was beautifully written, I found it hard to engage fully with her message. Perhaps I am a philistine, but I did not always understand the meaning of the poetry she included and found the general presentation a little bit esoteric. Nevertheless, I have to admit that there were parts of it to which I could directly relate and from which I could take a new insight.

Around the start of my PhD a colleague was exploring the use of fairy tale in representing research findings, he was working with another student’s undergraduate dissertation as she had used a fairy tale to illustrate the experience of being a special needs teacher. I worked with this particular story with

undergraduates and attended a departmental research seminar where the story was used as an example of research represented through fairy tale. I found the response to be that the audience identified the themes of the story but struggled to relate these to the actual experiences and they wanted a little more detail about the co-researchers' encounters. This resonates with the way I engaged with the more creative research reports.

The final stage of my research (as I viewed it for most of the time I was researching) was the search for a way of representing research. As I wasn't too sure how to approach this I concentrated more on level one and two research, or so I thought. I believed I needed to create an output of some kind so that it could be 'tested' as to the 'effectiveness' with an audience. I suppose I felt that there would be one 'type' of outcome that I could test.

It was during one of those moments where I was reading about one thing whilst writing about another that I realised I had been researching level three all along; not by being the researcher testing other people's responses but by being the audience of academic papers, novels, television programmes and so on. Of course if I am advocating subjectivity in research I should research this level subjectively! I had become more and more aware of how reading the work of others inspired my own thinking. In a move away from thinking, 'how can subjective, collaborative and creative research be presented to an audience in a way which best communicates the findings?' I began to consider, 'how does my understanding grow when I am the audience for somebody else's research?' I recognised my engagement with creative representations but also that I needed to understand, not just the feelings that were conveyed but the story behind them. My answer to 'what makes it research?'

regarding the engagement in activities at level one and level two had been ‘the reflection on the process of understanding’, it is no different for level three. In conveying research understanding both *mythos* as an expression of meaning, insight and intuition and *logos* as a logical account of what has been done and found are necessary. Sanders and Wilkins (2010: 4) suggest as much,

to draw *logos* and *mythos* together once more is likely to enrich our understanding of human experience, the ways in which we construct meaning, and the diversity and universality of our existence.

As I read many undergraduate studies during the course of my research (they came from the same degree as my own and so were of relevant subject and method) they were a primary resource for understanding myself as the audience. I began to recognise that I often read the creative synthesis or the results before turning back to the start of the document and this partly led to my considering the idea of results being presented before the method, or as I now see it a representation of what the understanding was in a pre-propositional sense before further exploration of this.

I noticed that appendices were often more empathically engaging and gave me more understanding of the experience being researched. For example, when reading a study on the experience of bullying I turned to the appendices to read a letter from the headmaster to the parents of the child being bullied and the reality of those words on the page were so chilling and really moved me. Also when reading this particular study I had the sense that the researcher was working backwards in the way I suggest from her understanding back to her experience and then to a higher level of understanding resulting from her journey; she seemed to start with her assumptions and work back to see how she made them (although this is not how she explained her process). In studies such as this I have often sensed more about the

experience and the perspective of the researcher than is explicit in the text. For example in this particular study it felt like the researcher justified the bullies behaviour in order to understand it and to make herself feel stronger, she discussed her assumption, and research that supports the fact that bullies are insecure, it felt like there was a question she was asking without being aware of it which was, ‘why did they do it?’.

As discussed above (in the section on reading) I am often inspired when reading other people’s work. It is not always an inspiration that relates to the topic I am reading about but nevertheless my mind is constantly making what I am reading relevant to me personally. My mind wanders but the path it takes stems from the words I am reading. I feel reading, for me, creates a space where insight can occur, this is illustrative of the space that creativity or meditation may induce as a way of facilitating self- discovery. Through the words of others there is the creation of an open and receptive state. The ‘influence’ of others does not taint our subjective understanding, it is part of it and so often in reflexivity the emphasis seems to be on exposing influence as a negative bias when it is the means by which we understand and therefore the more we engage with the meaning of others, the more we understand.

Important in considering the way our research understanding is communicated is the way in which I develop understanding of the topic being discussed. I do not only take the story I am told and add the information I am given to a bank of knowledge on a specific subject. In relating what I read to my own experience I am thinking about the experiences I am learning about. I remember other stories I have heard and compare them. This process creates more understanding than that which has

been passed on literally in the words that are written on the page. This is characterised in the hermeneutic circle and the idea that we interpret according to what we already know, meaning the text is changed in our reading of it (Palmer, 1969).

When working with undergraduate students at the beginning of my study I gave them two research reports, one quantitative and one a qualitative piece in the form of a story, both on the subject of experiences in school. As part of their assessment I asked them to discuss the papers and their findings. Many highlighted that they were more interested in the story as they engaged with it and understood it better; as first year undergraduates the students were mostly new to research and found the numbers more challenging. This was an outcome I had secretly expected but what I found interesting and had not predicted was the way in which they referred back to their own experiences in analysing the findings of both studies. They wrote, for example, “I did not agree with this because I experienced things completely differently at school” and “I thought that Caroline was a bit like me and some of the issues the story brings up are ones I remember myself”. At the time I looked at their responses and thought, well it shows that an audience does not take what they read in a research report as fact which helped with the answer to the question, ‘does it matter that one person’s story may not be verifiably accurate or representative?’ My instinct had always been that it did not matter, that the story would always be informative and that readers would be aware that it is only one story but my work with the undergraduate students showed me that we all question what we are told and compare it to our own experience and what we already know.



I concluded from the above that the key is for the communication to be meaningful rather than accurate in terms of its content. Habermas (1984) in his theory of communicative action proposes that we can reflect on premises and thematize aspects of cultural background knowledge to question an argument made by another person, he calls this ‘communicative rationality’ which also illustrates the ability to question research stories.

When revisiting Moustakas’ writing on Heuristic Research recently I was struck by the importance of tacit knowledge and intuition. I realised how central these ways of knowing are to my understanding of the research process and in particular the way I understand through reading. The notion that although we can only see one side of a tree we know there are branches on the other side and have a three dimensional understanding of the tree reminds me of the way we build understanding through encountering another person’s story. I was once talking to a friend about my interest in stories as a mode of representation and he said, “but of course, a fact is two dimensional but a story makes it three dimensional” (Adnan Malik, personal communication, 2000) and as I considered Moustakas’ tree this phrase which I had carried around in my mind, and on a scrap of paper, made me realise that it is our own intuition and tacit knowledge that makes the story 3D. The fact is meant to be understood exactly as it appears but the story requires an intuitive, tacit, empathic process to make it stand out. We fill in the gaps left by the storyteller with our own experience and knowledge and this creates holistic understanding; we understand as if we have experienced and so we have a vision of all sides of the tree. In chapter 2 I refer to a feeling of ‘understanding from within’

that occurred through fiction and drama and I now recognise this as an empathic and tacit process.

When writing up my first co-operative inquiry as an undergraduate I became interested in the process by which our group transformed the meaning of an experience from a variety of individual stories to a collective understanding. I was inspired by an article on the internet I had found by accident, in particular by one phrase referring to the hermeneutic circle (Palmer, 1969). It read, “it addressed the ways in which two people in conversation, or a reader reading a text, mutually transform each other’s ideas through continuing interaction” (Love, 1994: online). I applied the idea of the transformation of ideas to the role of conversation in research but later returned to pick up on the hermeneutic philosophy in the way we refer back to what we already know in reading a text.

The title of the hermeneutic circle is used to demonstrate the theory that the meaning of a part can only be understood in terms of the whole. The whole can only be understood on the basis of these parts (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 53). Traditionally the ‘whole’ would refer to the whole of the bible, or the whole of an ancient text, the parts being chapters or verses that need to be understood in terms of the whole message. Understanding is circular; there is dialectical interaction between the whole and the part (Palmer, 1969: 87). The whole when we read a research report could mean the whole of our understanding of the phenomenon and it also makes me think of a holistic understanding of the experiencing person (or people) we are reading about. The holistic picture is enhanced by some indication of the story behind the story; the storyteller’s character and why they are attributing

the meaning they do to the experience. When writing about hermeneutics as a social science methodology Messer et al (1990: 9) state,

Narrative accounts, as opposed to exteroceptively framed scientific laws are hermeneutic in the sense that they incorporate the phenomenology of the actor, the meaning laden character of social behaviour, and the contextual nature of knowing. The narrative mode also incorporates human intentions and goals, and describes the significance that conduct has for human agents. It allows for the use of connotative as well as denotative meanings in its forms of description and often employs metaphor, simile and other rhetorical devices. A narrative account sums up the meaning of the chain of events with which it deals in the manner of a satisfying and intelligible story, i.e., by lending coherence and shape to the events described therein.

In the moving back and forth from our understanding of the person we read about and how we understand their understanding there is an interaction with the text. Our understanding of the phenomenon changes even if we do not agree with what the author says; in considering how our experience may be different there is a learning process. Reading transforms meaning in the same way as conversation.

One undergraduate conducted an autoethnographic study into becoming a mum for the first time and wrote about her friends,

I can see they find it hard to relate to me as a mum, and are shocked that I am not the same as them anymore. I can understand I am not the same...they are going to the pub after they have visited me and I think the reality that I can't do this will make it difficult in the long run to adapt to these friends.

I latched onto this statement as I read the story. It was like being told that perhaps it was not my fault that my relationships with friends had become strained since I had become a mother. The way I picked up on this statement is an example of the way my focus on peer support in my motherhood research (chapter 8) emerged. Not only had I related the story I was reading to my own experience but it informed and

inspired my own research project. What I also find interesting is that at the same time as receiving this research report I was handed another piece of research, a methodological study similar to my PhD interests that was hailed as being quite brilliant. Although I agreed with the merits of the research that achieved the higher mark I engaged more with the motherhood study. Perhaps this signifies I was more interested in being a mother than a researcher at that time, but there was something that made me understand the motherhood story and become involved with it emotionally. I think this something is empathy.

From the start of my research (and I mean right back to my undergraduate days in a pre-propositional sense) I had a sense of the relevance of my love of literature and soap operas to the representation of research (above I refer to the sense of understanding from within myself). This love of stories was, and is, a love of being drawn into another person's world and experiencing events and emotions along with the characters. I think I have always had the desire to both learn about others and to enter other worlds in a way that allows me to feel and sense with my imagination.

Eisner (1991: 22) states,

One of the most useful forms of qualitative inquiry, for my purposes, is found in literature. Writers display the ability to transform their own experience into a public form called text, which, when artfully crafted, allows us to participate in a way of life. We come to know a scene by virtue of what the writer has made. Thus, the writer starts with qualities and ends with words. The reader starts with words and ends with qualities.

I think the connection between fiction and the way I engage with certain research reports is empathy and this is illustrated by Eisner's notion that 'the writer starts with qualities and ends with words. The reader starts with words and ends with qualities.' This seems explain my overall research process. Empathy is a very important process at all levels of my model and at level three it enables the transformation of meaning from the researchers understanding to that of the audience. This allows the passing on of a tacit, felt understanding from the creator of the level three output to the audience, who can then process it as a level one understanding. Further to this if the researcher makes clear the entirety of their understanding in the sense that they openly explain their process of understanding as well as what they understand they pass on their 'illumination' (Moustakas, 1990) in that the mythos and logos of the research are shared. This seems to satisfy the research outcome of understanding as distinct from knowledge as highlighted by Schwandt (1999).

In processing and explaining the group process involved in the collaborative research groups I wrote a fictional group story (appendix 8) in an attempt to convey the experience of being in these groups. It was a level three endeavour as it was originally intended as part of the main thesis but has also been a process of focusing my understanding and identifying some of the key processes (as appear above). The creative representation is, therefore, not just for the audience but for the researcher as a process of explication (Moustakas, 1990) and a way of making clear the tacit knowledge.

The notion of empathy as an important process in understanding from text is recognised in hermeneutic writing. Woolfolk et al (1990: 8) say of Dilthey,

To grasp in its fullness the “life” contained in historical and social events he believed a kind of empathic reliving (*Nacherleben*) was required.

Empathic reliving explains the way reading can create a level one research process for the reader; in reading we experience. Wilkins (2000a: 152) suggests of creative research products,

Perhaps this communication speaks most powerfully on an experiential level rather than on a cognitive one. It is none the worse for that: ‘What I hear I forget, what I see I remember, what I experience I understand.

In creating our own experience from reading about another person’s we are back to the notion of ‘filling in the gaps’. Perhaps this process of filling in the gaps makes reading experiential and therefore level one research. I was interested in a comment within an undergraduate dissertation where the researcher writes, “I am not sure I want to reveal the complete ‘truth’ because for me the experience is in the uncovering”. It is as if the researcher feels the person encountering the research should go through the same process of realisation as she has. It is the discovery and the re-creation of the experience as one’s own that the understanding is facilitated.

So I am drawn to this literary, empathically engaging, storytelling way of representing research findings, and as I have suggested earlier, this is a personal preference although for the reasons peppered throughout this chapter and the wider document I feel this ‘tell it like it is’ approach is appropriate (see appendix 5.2). I return now to the question, “what makes it research?” and spinning round my head

is the question posed in an issue of the journal, *Qualitative Inquiry*: “how do we judge, who judges?” (Richardson, 2000b: 253). What are the criteria for assessing research if there are no numbers to crunch or themes to analyse? Moustakas (1990: 32) offers the idea that,

The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience?

Moustakas suggests that this judgement is made by the researcher.

Taft-Kaufman (2000) offers a criticism of subjective, self-evaluated research, in particular referring to autoethnography,

The academic is invited to present a self-referential anecdote or “story” with little regard to such considerations as craft, rigor, verifiability, or other widely accepted criteria. Freed from these constraints, a variety of personal stories may be presented, but no story may claim greater value or credence than any other. This practice sidesteps the assessment of competing claims of knowledge, moral authority, and legitimacy, thorny issues that form the very substance of the academic endeavour and human existence.

I am not sure how to answer this criticism as it is difficult to compare one story against another, yet have not literary and art critics managed to recognise works of greater quality than others? One film can be more effective in engaging the audience and conveying a message than another. I also wonder about the idea of moral authority and competing claims of knowledge for I feel that within this is the question of how the academic can be the expert without external, measurable judgement criteria. When researching human experience (as is my interest) there is a problem with assuming the role of expert as those we are sharing our wisdom with

are also humans with their own experiences and theories. So perhaps we have to let go of being able to hail our work as having more worth than other people's.

In letting go of the 'methodological straightjackets' (Barone, 1997) it is necessary to re-evaluate what the research contributes to knowledge and what we are trying to achieve to ensure a suitable and effective representation. It is useful to consider the issue of truth and Ford (1975) provides a discussion of four meanings to the word 'truth': truth four is the empirical scientific truth; truth three is logical; truth two is ethical truth which conforms with moral or professional codes of conduct and truth one is metaphysical truth which cannot be tested against an external norm so must be accepted at face value. The idea of truth which cannot be tested is difficult to evaluate but perhaps the concept of 'authenticity' (Hutterer, 1990) is helpful. Also the effectiveness of research is about engaging and inspiring the reader. Bochner (2000:267) argues,

Traditionally we have worried much more about how we are judged as "scientists" by other scientists rather than about whether our work is useful, insightful, or meaningful – and to whom. We get pre-occupied with rigour but neglectful of imagination. We hold on to the illusion that we will unanimously agree on the culture-free standards to which all evidence must appeal, so that we won't have to rely on our own "subjectivity" to decide.

Perhaps it makes sense that our evaluation of subjective research is as subjective as the work we evaluate and we cannot set criteria. We can, however, consider how useful, insightful and meaningful it might be and to whom. In the following chapter I explore the way findings from the life stages group are useful and in chapter 9 I question how this thesis is useful. The useful dimensions will hopefully complement the insightful dimensions in the reflection on the processes explored and the meaningful dimensions in my less structured chapters (2, 8 & 10).

Chein (1972) offers a defence of the individual story saying,



a good example of seeing human behaviour in its complexity may be worth more in developing principles of grasping particularities than scores of statistically significant generalisations about highly circumscribed behaviours occurring under laboratory conditions.

If we interpret a good example of human behaviour in its complexity as an effective and engaging piece of writing that conveys a picture of the experience, we have to consider the quality of the writing as a way of evaluating the quality of the research.

My own criticism of this approach (being a literary/ narrative one) to representing research outcomes is the fact that the effectiveness of the representation and thus the research itself is largely reliant on the researcher's ability to write well and in a way that is emotionally engaging and thought provoking. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 738) echo this thought saying,

Most social scientists don't write well enough to carry it off. Or they're not sufficiently introspective about their feelings or motives, and the contradictions they experience.

Does this pre-requisite mean that many people would not be able to present introspective research effectively? Although it might be automatic to presume it would be less educated people who would fall into this bracket I am not so sure. I am thinking about a friend of mine who used to write to me from prison. His handwriting was like a child's because of his lack of education and yet his letters were engaging, funny and really conveyed a sense of his everyday life behind bars.

In considering some kind of democratisation of the research process and implicit in the notion of the experiencing person as expert is that 'subjects' become 'co-researchers' and therefore research moves way from being created solely by

academics. Therefore the nature in which the research is presented should move away from that which can only be understood by academics. In saying this I am not suggesting all form of academic rigour is removed, but merely that the way reports are constructed is more accessible. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 735) reflect, “so many of our texts argue in postmodern abstract jargon for greater accessibility and experimental forms.” I am certainly guilty of slipping back into convention and the whole production of this document has been a pulling between my wish to find a new and more appropriate form and the way it often seems to be shaping up to be a conventional research paper. Sometimes when family and friends pick up a bit of my writing they say, “it goes right over my head” thinking that is a compliment while I kick myself for the fact that I am not achieving clarity and accessibility.

I think perhaps what is required is an ability to embrace the everyday, to include thoughts and feelings and even seemingly irrelevant events from our lives; there must be some reason they come to mind as the fingers tap on the keyboard, much like the seemingly irrelevant aspects of our lives led successive research groups to themes for inquiry. When reading a co-researcher’s report from a collaborative research group I had not been a part of I was transported right into the heart of the group experience (the first page of this appears in appendix 6). This report read like a story; there were details about the room, the author talks about arriving late and her feelings about the people she finds there, and the language was informal and allowed her own voice and personality to leap out of the text. It is hard to find the confidence to include such detail of the surroundings of our experiences but they can be instrumental in the process of empathic engagement. Perhaps they allow our mind to relax, to wander, to become open and receptive so we begin to feel the

experience rather than concentrate on the literal meaning of the words on the page, creating the open and receptive state Moustakas (1990) refers to.

Within our lives there are objects that spark our memories and make us feel the past. When I was two years old I went to New York and within that memory it is always ‘the yellow bowl’ that stands out. I remember flying over the statue of liberty in a helicopter, my first flight in an aeroplane, the hotel we stayed in and the cold of the freezing winter, I remember watching my sister ice-skating and the first Christmas Eve I was read ‘The Night Before Christmas’. There are all these grand and significant memories yet when somebody mentions this trip to New York the first thing that comes to mind is the yellow bowl. I remember my ‘Uncle Mel’ coming down the stairs of the hotel and he was carrying a yellow bowl and I shouted out, “that’s my bowl!” because it was the same as the one I had at home. This yellow bowl is not an element of a trip to New York that is representative and indeed it is probably only me in the world for whom it is significant but if I told my story it would have to be there for anyone reading it to truly understand my experience.

I can think of so many examples of objects as key features in my memories; I liken these objects to music and smell and the role they play in transporting us to a former time and indeed the role music plays in guiding our emotions in films. In building a picture of a person’s experience it is the metaphorical surroundings that enable the transformation of meaning from the meaning as it is for the experiencing person to the meaning that is built for the reader,

because as we slip into the creative mode of reading we use when we are not expected to take account of the facts, we open that space where the imagination fills in the gaps, where intuition can make the story 3D, where understanding can take place because the act of reading becomes experiential. This is the process by which, ‘...the writer starts with qualities and ends with words. The reader starts with words and ends with qualities (Eisner, 1991: 22).

As I am sitting here I have just glanced over at my literature notebook and noticed Hunt (2000: 52) says something similar,

writing fictionalised autobiography, because it moves one away from facts that have to be known into fictions that need to be felt, encourages a state of mind in which one can ‘give up the wish to know’ in order to experience.

Wade et al (2009) talk of the process of writing fiction as being more rigorous than that of writing the traditional research report as it demands more than reporting, there is the need for an aesthetic describing of the human condition. As with the suggestions I make above Wade et al also see the place for traditional writing along with the evocative, but interestingly see this as a way of giving ‘breathing space’ to create the fictional having already provided justifications and the nuts and bolts in the traditional account. Of the power of fiction they write (p54),

Having read the more traditionally presented works with the narrative, I feel with this latter form as though I know these brave and troubled teens in a fuller way. I find myself thinking of them from time to time, praying that the remainder of their lives brings them a richly deserved peace.

Perhaps it is part of the craft of the writing to recognise the seemingly insignificant elements of the experience. It is often the case that this recognition is a product of

the research process; findings being about the establishment of the minutiae of experiences and the meaning that is attributed to them. Writing is a rigorous analytic research process and it is the exposing of the experience which is the measure of both an effective piece of research and the effective communication of it.

Many researchers recognise the importance of the process of writing as a research tool as much as an exercise in communication, notably Richardson (1994) discusses writing as inquiry and the notion that is not just ‘mopping up’ at the end of the study. The therapeutic nature of writing that I have recognised in my own studies is also highlighted by work such as Hunt (2000) and as discussed elsewhere I see this therapeutic dimension as of benefit to the research process. In creating the research document the process of the research is continued, Schwandt (1999: 455-456) writes,

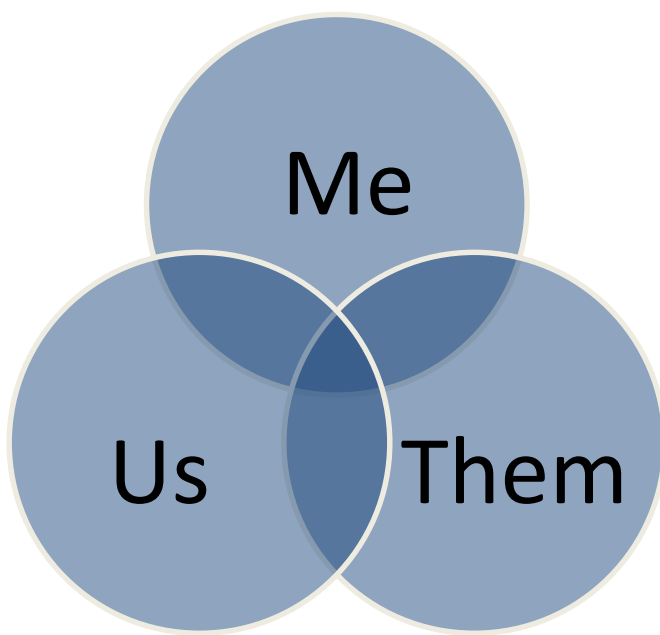
Our efforts to present, to articulate, to pronounce, or to say what we think we understand are inseparable from our efforts to understand. To say it more simply, there isn’t first a silent act of comprehension followed by a public recitation, rather understanding and speaking meaning are intertwined.

Throughout my study has been the constant cycle where my ideas and questions take me back to the realisation that the levels of my model are inseparable. That the level three act of creating a representation of understanding would encompass a level one process of intra-personal communication and a level two co-creation of ideas from conversation and reading is no surprise.

So in some kind of summary of where this all leads me; the representation of the understanding developed through subjective research should be engaging and give a

holistic story rather than a fragmented discussion of the different elements of the experience. It should be assumed by both the researcher and the audience that this is a subjective piece to interact with rather than to take as fact. The aim of this communication is not to pass on knowledge that can be banked in some sort of mental library but to share experience and understanding to inspire thought and a personal research process for the audience. In this way research is a snowball that rolls and collects ideas, experiences and understanding in one big collaborative research project, one co-creation from which we can all take the bits that we need and expand them as we expand our own understanding before sending that bit of fallen snow back into the collective ball from which others can draw. But then it is like we give that understanding back when actually we also keep it within ourselves. Also, this snowball seems like too solid a form from which pieces are broken away and it is only in one place at one time. Perhaps rain is a better analogy. Perhaps our contribution to knowledge is like the moisture evaporated from the earth into a cloud of collective meaning; this cloud then bestows the collected stories and perspectives on others and the water passes through rivers of understanding before being evaporated back into a cloud and so the process continues. Maybe you can go too far with metaphor! Didn't I say what is really important is communicating my understanding of what I understand in an understandable fashion? I hope that makes it clear (does that mean the rainclouds are dispersing?)

The processes as transforming understanding through the three levels  
of inquiry



***THEM*** → ***ME***

On encountering research representations or other sources conveying the essence of human experiences, such as film, radio, fiction and biography, there is a transformation of meaning through empathy and interpretation from ‘them’, the creators of that text, be it in written form, visual form or dramatic form, to ‘me’ as an introspective process of engaging with the way personal experiences and understanding relates to that which is explored in the text.

*ME* —→ *US*

Research that represents a level one understanding becomes level two understanding when the researcher engages in practices such as conversation and storytelling, sharing written stories and group work. Level two is a mutual sharing and mutual facilitation of introspective and subjective process; thus intersubjective. This can be aided by the climate of the relationship and personal growth which allows further exploration of level one understanding that can be shared as a level two process.

*US* —→ *ME*

The understanding generated in groups and through conversations with others, in being reflected upon develops level one understanding when the researcher considers their own understanding in the light of the collective understanding. This is the result of personal growth, empathy through engaging with co-researchers' stories and the creation of an openness where insight can occur.

*ME/US* —→ *THEM*

The creation of a research output represents the communication of understanding, and therefore the transformation of meaning from the researcher(s) to an audience. This involves processes of creativity, reflection and of course writing. In this transformation the researcher(s) have to form their understanding into that which can be understood by others. This provides another level of inquiry as ideas have to take a form that involves clarity and the identification of outcomes, which is often



something that takes place as a reflexive process at this stage and moves the research from personal growth or learning into the domain of research; even if the outcome is transformational (Heron, 1996) or developmental (Wilkins, 2000b); the process of ‘how can they understand?’ helps facilitate a realisation of what has been achieved.

***THEM* → *ME* → *US***

In engaging with other people’s understanding and the influence this has on our own understanding it could be considered that the understanding which results is level two as it is a co-creation between ‘us’. I, for example talk continuously about the literature as ‘data’ and as such the authors are co-researchers. I similarly talk about the reading process as experience; does that make a reflection on the reading process a level one understanding as it is my reflection on *my* experience or does it make it level two as it is my reflection on *our* experience? I had previously thought of it as the latter but now I sway towards this being a level one understanding as influenced by a level two process. If this is the case then all resulting understanding, is to a large extent level one understanding. This is not an issue that I feel needs to be settled here but one which remains a consideration. What matters is an awareness of the influence the work of others has on any resulting understanding.

## A reflection on my process using the model

### **Level One**

My understanding of the research process and in particular my own research process, is a part of who I am. The way my understanding of the world was shaped by the home I grew up in is clear now I have reflected on it. I was encouraged to be who I am with no restrictions on creativity or going against the grain – in fact it was actively encouraged. I developed a naturally reflexive way of being illustrated by the fact that an old boyfriend used to call me an ‘emotional lunatic’ in reference to the way I processed experiences; thought about them, wrote about them and the way I absorbed film and fiction into my experience of the world. This deep reflection was recognised and enhanced when I became an undergraduate. My model clearly embodies the reflexive element of my nature, my love for reading and writing and my desire to engage with the experiences of others. This demonstrates that it is a subjective model.

My subjective process has involved a journey in understanding research from my undergraduate years. This has moved to understanding my own research process which has demanded an honest reflection on my failings and anxieties as well as my successes. This is addressed in chapter 8.

### **Level Two**

As I reflect I recognise the impact of my level one understanding on my level two practices. I wonder about the extent of my influence on the group inquiries. Of course I was often the facilitator or co-facilitator and my understanding of research and my experience of previous research groups was

shared and in this sense became the knowledge we had to work with. I mention the idea of a 'choice' to enter into an organic emergence process and to work in a person centred way but in reality would the students who were my co-researchers have any confidence in suggesting an alternative way of working? It is interesting that one group did not establish a climate in which growth and the sharing of new self-understanding could occur. The following group was radically different and I have no doubt that this was in part due to my raising person centred principles as a desirable way of working from the group's initial meeting.

The group work has, of course transformed my level one understanding as key processes such as transformation of meaning and personal growth were recognised through the co-operative inquiry groups. I now recognise these processes as key at all levels of inquiry. Co-researchers' descriptions of being engaged in research have also been inspirational. In addition being a member of these groups has aided my own personal growth.

### **Level Three**

Above is a discussion about the way I have worked through ideas about passing on the resulting understanding from research to an audience. In truth this is something I am still considering and working through as I have not yet put the final full stop on this thesis. The construction of this thesis has made me take my 'fluid, messy, chaotic everything relates to everything' approach and explain it in a way that can be understood by others. Until now that seemed like a negative process. It felt like a betrayal of an 'outcome is within persons' approach. I felt I was going against some of my feelings about creative writing,

the telling of a story and allowing for empathic engagement. In truth the telling of any story involves an editorial process. The very point I make in my discussion of the hermeneutic circle is that we cannot convey the exactness of experience and neither can the reader interpret it in such a way. Rather than re-creating the messiness I have added, as part of the research process, a reflexive approach that involves delving in through reflection and making explicit my practices and the way my experiences have developed my understanding through three levels of inquiry. This may have been a compromise of sorts to conform to those 'patriarchal structures' but actually it has been a helpful, clarifying process. I expect readers will add their own 'messiness' as part of their interpretation.

So this has been a fluid and non-predetermined method of inquiry but the method of reflection *is* structured as it is guided by the framework I have recognised. So in allowing an organic process of understanding as research I offer a way of reflecting on this which allows for the uncovering of this process as a retrospective method. In addition the processes and practices I identified became a 'how to' for researching which was adopted by the research groups and which I continue to deploy in my individual studies. The 'writing up' of this thesis has been the elongated process in my research, the multiple 're-writing' has been the reflexive process of continuously questioning what I have understood and how I have understood it. This needed to eventually, however, move beyond what was operating as a level one process into a level three process.

Level three is the process of forming understanding into a way that is understandable to 'them'. As I realised in researching level three the researcher needs to be able to pass on their illumination, their holistic understanding, to the audience. The ideal is to achieve clarity and an account of process, but also to create an account that will inspire empathy and tacit understanding in a way which can start a new level one process for somebody else to pick up. I will keep trying!

## **Chapter 7 – Achieving Informative Findings: Theory emerging out of personal growth in the life stages project**

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the model can be used to transform personal learning and growth into informative research with emphasis on how the approach can be used to generate new understanding and theory. The paper (appendix 1) written in relation to the group inquiry into life stages focused on personal growth as a developmental outcome of research whereas here I will highlight the informative findings to illustrate the potential the model offers for transforming personal learning and growth into informative research.

### **Phase One – Engaging with a subject of inquiry**

On entering the research the five student members of the group were in their final year of university and therefore experiencing a time of change. This was not something we were consciously aware of at the time but it became apparent through a process of organic emergence, where we allowed the subject of inquiry to emerge out of our time together. As a result the focus was of importance to us all, and a matter of concern. The research was therefore both timely in that as co-subjects we were researching a phenomenon while we were experiencing it, and it was growth promoting.

### **Organic Emergence**

As we wanted to draw on our own experiences we decided to spend time getting to know one another before focusing on a topic for inquiry. Much of our time was spent in conversation and just ‘being’ together. We used creative methods from art therapy; drawing our position in the group and drawing our lives at that time. We spent a day out in local

woods and had a picnic, feeling that removing ourselves from our usual room would help develop our relationship. There was some frustration in our difficulty ‘deciding’ on a topic for our research. One coffee break three of us suddenly realised ‘life stages’ seemed to be a theme of our conversations and meetings. When we suggested this to the rest of the group; they agreed with an enthusiastic, “yes, that’s it!” We realised our conversations had revolved around leaving university and how we felt we were going through a time of transition into adulthood. The day we spent in the woods was playful and we stated when planning it that we wanted to return to childhood. On reflection all of this was part of the research and led us to the topic of ‘life stages’.

### **Pre-propositional Knowing**

We talked about our parents making changes to our family homes which we recognised as a stage in our lives where we were being encouraged to ‘fly the nest’ and therefore become independent. We had developed a group understanding about the nature of the life stage we felt we were in and had drawn attention within our group to the significance of the events we were experiencing but we had not yet described this as a ‘life stage’. On planning our day out to local woods we expressed a desire to return to childhood and spent our time building a den. This pre-propositional knowing built understanding between us about the notion of ‘growing up’

### **Illumination**

We realised the essence of what had been uncovered during our conversations and activities was an interest in life stages. Our activities to this point informed the next phase of our research.

## **Phase 2 – Research Practices to Transform Meaning**

### **Conversation and Storytelling**

Conversation and storytelling way our main tool for research. Hearing one person's story would remind us of our own experiences, uncovering new 'data' that could contribute to our group learning. Stories allowed for the inclusion of the experiencing person as they were told from their frame of reference.

### *Transformation of Meaning*

*Level One* – A co-researcher's reflection on their own experience and feelings was a level one process of inquiry. Equally on hearing another person's story we would begin a level one process when comparing it against our own experience and amending our understanding of it accordingly. For example, one co-researcher discusses how they have to phone their father, reflecting on the way this signifies a change in their relationship because this has become their responsibility.

*Level Two* – Responding to stories and sharing our experiences developed a group understanding which had been filtered through our various experiences, understanding and perspectives. Regarding the above example, hearing this story made us reflect on our own relationships with our parents (a level one process). We shared our own feelings about a sense of our parents becoming less responsible for us and in some cases a feeling of becoming responsible for them.



*Level Three* – Some of these conversations resulted in insight that was directly recorded to be shared with a third party but all conversations contributed to our eventual understanding which we were able to share. Conversations changed the way we understood the aspect of life stages being discussed and therefore the way we would present it to others in the future. The stages of responsibility we drafted resulted from the conversation above (along with others) which led us to question how our responsibilities changed over time. Below I take this further in highlighting the reason understanding this was of such importance.

### *Personal Growth*

Personal growth was facilitated through the climate, characterised by person-centred principles, which encouraged the sharing of experiences openly and honestly. One co-researcher talked of the way this increased her understanding of herself, “Gaining this level of awareness of who I am was mainly influenced by the climate of the group”

Personal growth also helped the depth of our conversations,

Change within the individual in some strange way adds to the collective knowledge of those individuals. There is a sense that in our knowledge and discovery of ourselves we are able to let go or allow part of that as a contribution to the group process.

We were able to share with the group the new understanding about our experience that characterised our personal growth.

## **Creativity**

We used creative expression to uncover meaning, identify a ‘felt sense’ that we could not explain verbally and develop personal and group growth. We used the process explained earlier;

- The image manifests itself within the person;
- The person externalises the image through paint or clay;
- There is a dialogue with the therapist (in the case of group research with other group members), so the meaning may become known on a conscious level;
- It may become necessary to work on the revealed meaning.

Silverstone (1993: 131-132)

Out of this process our main finding was our definition of life stages which was created from the commonalities we saw in our life maps. On drawing our life maps we set out to draw how we saw our lives, in terms of the stages we had progressed through and those we saw as part of our future.

*Level One-* The process of drawing the life map involved the imaging of the stages we felt we had been through, or that we felt we would encounter, which was an introspective process.

*Level Two* – In explaining our life maps to one another our understanding changed. At times our understanding of our own map changed as we saw the significance of a spiral we had drawn or a particular colour we had used. We saw stages other group members had included and realised they were significant in our own lives. In particular we saw the commonalities in our projections for the future, such as marriage and setting up our own homes.

*Level Three* – The drawing of the life map was a level three exercise in that we attempted to present our understanding of our own life stages through our drawings. In explaining the drawings we made this understanding explicit, to ourselves as well as the other members of the group. In discussing the life map the understanding became co-created through a level two process.

### *Personal Growth*

The internal space which is opened through creativity allowed us to explore our experiences and our fears and aspirations about the future. Reflecting on our feelings about the changes in our lives promoted personal growth through the recognition of the significance of these changes. As with all elements of the research the relationship in the group was instrumental in providing a space where we felt safe and supported in sharing our feelings, some of which may have seemed trivial in other situations.

Our increased insight through personal growth allowed us to learn more about ourselves which we could share with the group. As we talked through our life maps we were able to recognise significant changes such as moving out of the parental home and how they had made us feel.

### **Phase 3 – Making findings explicit**

At the time the life stages research came to a conclusion we were more interested in our process and the outcomes of growth than any informative findings we had reached. We concurred with Heron's (1996: 101) assertion that written, informative outcomes were secondary in importance to transformative outcomes. My own interest in our approach and the development of a model to encompass this eventually resulted in this thesis. However, in questioning 'what makes it research' and exploring the depth of insight personal growth allowed I have returned to appreciate the findings from the life stages work as informative and able to contribute to academic understanding of the life course.

At the time of the research we recognised propositions which were the result of our time together and our inter-subjective exploration, but which had wider significance. The definition we gave to 'life stages' was:

Life Stages are significant points in the past, present, or future which occur because of biological, emotional or cultural processes but of which we have an individual experience. These events tend to occur in the same order (but possibly at different times) for most people. Men and women have different experiences but nevertheless they go through equivalent stages.

This definition arose out of our life maps which included experienced and projected life stages which were biological, emotional and cultural. We recognised stages occurring due to biological processes such as puberty; emotional processes such as the loss of a parent; and cultural processes such as starting school.

Following our definition, and through the hot-seat interviews where we re-focused on the experiences of group members, we became less interested in cultural or gender based

differences in life stages and more immersed in our own stories and anxieties. Out of our own concerns we drafted a list of stages of responsibility:

- Your parents are responsible for you
- You are responsible for yourself
- On having children you become responsible for them
- As your parents age you become responsible for them
- You return to being responsible for yourself (children having flown the nest and parents passed away)
- In old age somebody else (e.g. your children becomes responsible for you)

#### The importance of transitions

Through our conversations and our life maps key events signifying transitions in our life stage were identified. These included:

- Starting School
- Learning to Drive
- Getting Drunk
- Rebelling

On reflection the majority of these related to becoming an adult and becoming more independent. We recognised the importance of these events through conversation. On reflection, our interest in the subject area stemmed from anxiety about leaving university and becoming 'independent'. The research was personally developmental in that we were able to explore these anxieties and see them as part of a transitional stage.

When creating these stages of responsibility we did not recognise the importance of the emotional impact of moving between the stages of responsibility which we had become

interested in as life stages. It is clear (and to some extent it was clear at the time) that the feeling of being ‘kicked out of the nest’ which dominated many of our conversations was a significant emotion representing a need to retain the ability to return home and to the care and responsibility of our parents.

As a result of this research theory emerged surrounding the impact of times of transition through life stages. Co-researchers were mostly young adults in their early twenties and a key life stage recognised through this study is early adulthood. Feelings of uncertainty about the future and a desire to cling to the past and retain some of the security associated with being children were uncovered as prominent concerns for co-researchers. We were interested in the notion of dependency and this led to the formation of the stages of responsibility, which was also influenced by the feeling of the oldest co-researcher about moving into a stage where he was responsible for his father and the wider family. It is the ‘moving’ into a stage that created anxiety and the way the research highlights this is an important outcome.

During the approach to Christmas we began discussing the ways we would be celebrating. We decided to each bring in something from home that was a part of our Christmas. This led to a discussion about Christmas traditions and for each of us there was some kind of ritual we felt had to be performed. We realised how important these rituals were to us and that we needed them as a yearly affirmation that although many things changed in our lives, there are some things that remain constant.

There is a wider, informative significance to the importance of tradition and ritual. For us, these rituals were symbolic of retaining links with our families and a space in which we belonged or could return to. There is a sense that we could cope with the uncertainties we

experienced elsewhere in our lives if we felt we could return to this safe space. Van der Hart (1983: xvii) makes clear the importance of family rituals,

There are families that due to a lack of certain rituals are suffering and are inhibited in their development. For example they cannot make a certain transition on their own to the next stage of their life cycle.

The importance of these rituals has continued to be apparent in the conversations we have had with others in the years since our research. For example, Paul (being the one member of the group with whom I still have regular contact) told me about how his neighbours hold a Christmas party each year and how one year, although none of the children (all young adults) were going to be able to attend the party they were all adamant that the party should still take place, as if they needed the reassurance that this ritual would maintain a sense of constancy.

The need for constancy is reflected in our need to feel we could return to the parental home despite our desire to be independent. We began to see the need to hold on to elements of one stage to be able to move into the next. In particular, at this time we wanted to hold on to elements of our childhood and a feeling of being looked after, to enable us to move into adulthood.

Our findings are informative as an insight into a little acknowledged developmental stage of young adulthood. Much attention has been paid to adolescence and in particular infancy and childhood dominate in developmental psychology (Arnett, 2012). Arnett (2004) describes 'emerging adulthood' as an 'in between' time (2004: 14-16) following much research with people in their late teens to mid-twenties. Our focus on tradition and ritual as providing a reassuring constancy adds to this body of work (which encompasses many aspects from

other writers and researchers illustrated in the edited book *'Emerging Adults in America: Coming of age in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, (Arnett & Tanner (Eds), 2004).

Beyond the focus on the life stage we felt we were in at that time, (being on the threshold of adulthood) I feel the importance of tradition and ritual and the maintenance of 'something constant' is something worthy of further research and exploration. This is not a question about cultural ritual or any large scale traditions such as those provided through religion, but a question about rituals specific to individuals or small groups such as families. Perhaps it is the specific nature that makes these rituals so profound; all of the life stages group celebrated Christmas but it was the individual rituals which held meaning and represented that which was constant in our personal worlds.

The informative outcomes from the life stages research demonstrate the potential for the emergence of theory from research which is driven by the personal growth and learning of the co-researchers who not only reflect, but inquire deeply into their own experience and the meaning they have attributed to it.

### Why this research group developed informative findings but others did not: a reflection on important steps in the process.

To question how this group was successful in reaching informative findings through personal growth I will highlight the way this group differed from the third research group, which did not reach informative findings. It is important to note that I regard group 3 as failing to reach informative findings but not to have failed. There was a significant amount of personal learning as an outcome of that group, although I can only comment on my own.



The distinction I wish to make here is between the facilitation of growth for personal learning and the facilitation of growth for research.

### **Climate**

From the life stages research group every member reported feeling they were accepted, not judged and listened to empathically. The person-centred conditions were effectively communicated and facilitated a climate which encouraged disclosure and personal growth. In research group 3 we experienced problems with the relationship from the start.

There were two members of the group who had not worked in a person-centred way before, with the other members of the group (four undergraduates, one tutor and myself as a researcher) being familiar with the theory and practice of the approach. It was presumed by those of us accustomed to a person-centred way of being that this would characterise the interaction in the group. The two co-researchers unaware of this approach dominated our time together with conversations that seemed to be an attempt to fill the silences, rather than an attempt at genuine encounter with the group. A divide in the group developed which was characterised by a lack of acceptance towards these individuals. This lack of acceptance and empathy resulted in some important personal stories being dismissed. In particular one of these two members of the group talked at length about her experience of being adopted which did not seem to be recognised as significant by the other members of the group and which was not supported in the way the stories had been in the life stages group.

The lack of engagement with co-researchers stories thwarted the group process by stories remaining the story of one individual and so being a level one process on the part of the storyteller; the stories were received as a level three process in the communication of this story to the rest of the group. The stories did not initiate the level two process of generating

understanding together, which had been instrumental in the life stages research as illustrated above.

The way the group expects to interact must be established at the start of the research. This is not necessarily about an in depth understanding of person-centred theory (although I maintain a belief that the principles are ‘necessary and sufficient’ in creating a beneficial climate) but it is important to establish guidelines governing behaviour towards one another and issues such as confidentiality. It is also important to emphasise that a focus on the group should be maintained; this means that conversations are likely to involve events and issues from outside the group but that the sharing of stories should be a contribution to the group process rather than distraction from it. In relation to this the role of congruence is important. In group 3 it would have been useful if we had been more aware of the influence our different ways of interacting were having on the group so we could address this. We may have brought up how *we* expected co-researchers to communicate but I am not sure we were aware of our individual impact on the process. Most critical is that the group engages in genuine encounter for growth to occur and for a focus to emerge.

### **Reflecting on time together and the emergence of a theme**

In the life stages group we were always aware of the need to arrive at a focus for our research. Research group 3 elected to allow our focus to emerge but we did not move on from the first phase of research where we were trusting that our time together would result in a research-worthy focus. I have suggested in chapter six that the recognition of pre-propositional knowing is essential to move forward with the research. It is questioning what the group knows as a result of their time together that results in the identification of pre-propositional knowing. This is the step which allows the process of personal growth to be transformed into research with potentially informative outcomes.

In the 'experiences in groups' elective which ran as an encounter group rather than a research group, the climate was developed as described in the above section but as there was no intention to research we were not looking for a common theme. This demonstrates that it is not the personal growth and group climate in itself which facilitates the research process, but that there needs to be reflection on common experience and the recurrence of subjects of conversation, along with an engagement in activities such as those explained in the previous chapter to further the process of self-searching and group understanding.

### **Entering the third phase of research**

It may seem a strange point to make about research but it is important to enter into a phase where the communication of research outcomes to an audience is considered. The model allows for the emergence of a theme for research, and for the direction of the inquiry to change according to the emerging understanding and the questions that become apparent. This is one of the great benefits of the approach, for example in researching life stages we were able to pursue responsibility as an aspect of life stages which held meaning for the co-researchers. The possible consequence of allowing the research to flow freely is that it could continue to flow indefinitely. It is important to determine a point at which the findings will be identified and this allows a level three process to occur. If there is the potential for extending the research this can be done in the light of those findings (for example the life stages group could further explore the importance of ritual).

Research group three was a rich learning experience; I was able to reflect on my way of being in the group and how this hindered the research process. One problem was my lack of openness regarding my feelings about the climate of the group. I was also focused on our past ways of researching, such as using creativity, which when rejected I understood as co-researchers resistance to introspection and self-disclosure when it was actually an

opposition to those particular activities. Despite this personal learning no group understanding was developed.

If we had reflected upon our individual learning and had developed our group discussions about what was happening in the group I think a focus would have emerged. I have always recognised the theme of ‘acceptance’ as encapsulating our time together and our conversations. Our experience of being in the group was about how we were accepted and how we accepted others. The co-researcher who discussed her adoption, repeatedly talked about being ‘chosen’ by her adoptive parents and accepted as their daughter in her local community. I wonder how we could have explored her feelings behind this way of framing her experience. One co-researcher was concerned about being accepted by her boyfriend’s family due to religious and cultural differences and another talked about how she changed the way she dressed when she started university to ‘fit in’. Despite the potential for a focus to emerge we did not reflect adequately to allow this and we did not engage fully with the stories when they were shared.

Level three inquiry is about making the understanding developed through the research explicit. Although this is primarily with the intention of sharing the outcomes with others it is a key process which uncovers further understanding. We experienced this when we presented out life stages research, in writing up the research for publication and in my later reflections which are included above. Most research begins with set aims and questions and the research is concluded by answering these. The model I describe in this thesis requires an imposed point of conclusion; I do not see this as an end to the research but as a point at which the learning is recognised, made explicit and shared to inform others and contribute to their development of understanding.

## **Chapter 8 – Motherhood and Work Apnoea: Two research projects that have helped and hindered my PhD study.**

This chapter gives an illustration of how the model can be used for individual inquiry and it is the representation of the research which led me to consider how the model could be built upon by others who struggle with fitting research in around busy family and professional lives. Embracing the issues in my life as ‘data’ for research could be replicated by those feeling they have no time to research their professional practice or other aspects of their lives which could inform others.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly it will provide a demonstration of research that I have carried out and represented according to the method developed through my PhD research. Secondly the subjects I have studied have evolved as part of the main study and address two major issues that have hindered my research process (but in doing so they are an important part of it). These issues are:

- 1) Producing and raising two children during the course of the research
- 2) An ‘inability’ to sit down and write up my research

The first part of this chapter gives an earlier account of each of these pieces of research as separate projects followed by a reflection on the way the two studies relate. In the second part of the chapter I reflect again on the research as one study, obtaining new insights and understanding the wider significance of this study and the way it is an integral part of the model.

## **Part One**

It has taken me so long to even get near to finishing my PhD. I panic at the thought of this and I want to bury my head in the sand but all I have is a pile full of scribbled notes and a pile of nappies so I bury myself in these.

### **Motherhood**

From the moment I became a Mum I felt there must be a research project in there somewhere but I did not focus on the idea and continued being a mother and a researcher in separate parts of my life. I will tell the story of the research that did unfold and then explain it in terms of my model. In July 2008 I was working in the library reading about something unrelated to motherhood and I started to write. A poem came out and I realised that this research into motherhood, which I had always felt I was doing with two friends, was about our relationship and the support we have given each other. I had my first baby around the same time as two of my friends from school, we hadn't really seen each other much since our school days but began to meet up when we realised we all had babies of a similar age. Our partners all became friends too and we spent afternoons and evenings all together, we would enjoy New Year's Eve together because none of us could go out and we would go for walks together at the weekend, often we needed a drink to get through it all! We had our second babies together and went through everything as a group all over again.

So often we have questioned how we would have coped with parenthood if we hadn't had each other. Even so I was nervous about passing the poem I had written in that moment in the library to my co-researchers. I thought they might not feel the

same way and that if they did they may feel I was exaggerating the importance of this relationship but then we were at a barbeque together and one of the fathers brought up the fact that he would not have coped without the support of our group friendship and this boosted my confidence. When I read through this poem there are tears in my eyes, not of sadness but because I am so grateful and because it makes me realise just how important the support of my comrades has been.

*If You Hadn't Been There: My comrades in motherhood*

So often we stop and say,

‘But what if you hadn’t been there?’

What if we hadn’t done this together?’

It frightens us to think,

What if we had been on our own?

On our own in a world full of mothers.

My mother is one of them,

But she did things differently,

She is critical,

She thinks she is the only mother;

She knows more than any other

They all do it,

Have their babies and, suddenly,

They are the only ones to have done it,

The only ones who understand,

The only ones who know best.

But we are all the same,

Aren't we?

My comrades and me,

Battling forward,

Tutting and grumbling,

'I wouldn't do it like that'.

And we all feel judged;

Because we leave our children and go to work,

Because we don't work and stay at home,

'Ah you've gone ga-ga'

'You need to get out more'

Childless friends say.



But I'm never at home,

'You need some adult company',

But we are colleagues, my comrades and me,

And we are all friends,

And we tell each other,

We are doing the right thing,

And we criticise the mothers,

Who are not in our clan;

We say,

'I'm not perfect,

But they are worse than I am.'

But really this is our shield

Against the ways they may criticise us,

Because we are judged,

For being bad mothers,

And also we judge.

We make a safe space,  
Where we feel we are doing o.k.  
We can be going mad.  
We can be angry and sad.  
But we can bake cakes and say,  
'I wouldn't have it any other way'.  
And after a sleepless night,  
We can sit and laugh,  
As our older children fight,  
Using language that we certainly didn't teach them,  
And the babies take off their nappies,  
And smear poo on the walls;  
But still we drink coffee  
In spite of it all  
And we tell tales of our trips to A & E,  
'Because we weren't watching the children properly'

If you hadn't been there

To do this with me,

I would have fallen apart,

Most probably,

And it's amazing to think

The only way we get through,

Is by you having me,

And me having you.

And all that we need,

Psychologically,

Is a conversation,

And a cup of tea.

This job that is so hard

Has been done by so many before,

And many will go on,

In spite of it all.

So maybe they all say to someone,

Like us three,

‘If you hadn’t been there’

Like my comrades and me.

So much of this poem is about the way we are viewed as mothers by other people. Throughout our time together we have had conversation after conversation about how we are judged. We have been seen as boring, and even depressed by good friends who have no children because we don’t go out with them every weekend and stay out until the early hours. There is an endless feeling of criticism for not working. It is as if we are devalued by not earning money. Yet on returning to work one of the mothers felt judged for leaving her children. Every step we take we justify to one another why we are raising our children the way we are, we sound off one another to check we are doing o.k. Through conversation we process motherhood. We process our experience and how we feel about the attitudes to motherhood around us. One of us saw research discussed on television which suggested children are more socially developed when they attend nursery rather than stay at home with a parent. We had endless discussions about how flawed this argument was while other friends with children in nursery smiled and felt their decision to go to work was now justified; they had done the best for their baby, and we were somehow failing them in not wanting to leave them.

I read an undergraduate dissertation on the experience of becoming a mum for the first time and I found it interesting and engaging, particularly as I had some interest in researching motherhood myself and I was interested in reading about other

women's experiences. I was struck by the way the researcher talked about her friends,

I can see they find it hard to relate to me as a mum, and are shocked that I am not the same as them anymore. I can understand I am not the same...they are going to the pub after they have visited me and I think the reality that I can't do this will make it difficult in the long run to adapt to these friends.

This feeling resonated with the way I had felt distanced and misunderstood by friends of mine who had no children. It also reminded me that I had once behaved in this way towards a friend who had a baby before I became a mother. As I reflect on the way I picked up on this element of this study I realise this helped me to focus on the subject of support and being judged in developing my own research into motherhood; it helped focus the organic emergence process.

I realise now how much this personal study of motherhood is a social one. Writing this chapter has made me think about how my anxieties are fuelled by my change in identity in becoming a mother, how I am now so different from those friends I had so much in common with (some of which were involved in my undergraduate 'Belonging' study). It has raised issues around how a 'stay-at-home-mum' is viewed, or feels she is viewed in the society and time I am living in. Jong (cited in Devlin, 1995: 1) writes,

Motherhood is supposed to be a part of nature: timeless, immutable, a kind of female Rock of Ages. In truth, nothing is more mutable than motherhood – ringed round with its conventions and pretensions of the society in which it appears. Everything about motherhood changes with our ideologies: breast feeding and swaddling, mother-infant bonding or separation, anaesthesia or natural birth, giving birth standing, sitting or lying down, alone or with kin, midwife or obstetrician. Even the feelings the mother supposes she is supposed to have can be changed.

I was enthralled with a study, '*Motherhood: From 1920 to the present day*' (Devlin, 1995) that I found in the library, it is an oral history, a collection of stories and experiences of motherhood as told by women from fifteen to ninety three years old. This gives a very interesting picture of the change in the role of motherhood and attitudes towards motherhood since 1920. Quite quickly I realised I was more like a mother of the 1940's than one of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Devlin (1995:2) writes,

A recent survey showed that over 70 per cent of all women with very young children expect to continue working; the working mother is becoming an accepted fact of life, there are only one in five British men and women believe that a woman's place is in the home. It seems that quite a social revolution has taken place.

While I feel strongly that women have the right to work I feel I am much more like the mother of the 1940's who writes "What is nicer than a line of clean nappies" (Devlin 1995: 5) than one of the 1990's writing, "I need to work as well for my own sanity" (*ibid.*).

I felt I was valued less by others when not working, and so often it is inferred that being at home with children leads to some kind of insanity or at least diminishing intelligence. I take great pride in being a housewife and mother and all around me are those who think that is pathetic. I feel ashamed to say I feel it is right that I am at home and that I want to be at home and that this is the best thing for my children; it is like an insult against feminism. It is as if I feel I am not allowed to enjoy taking care of my family, so here it is I am coming out of the closet; I enjoy hanging washing on the line and preparing an evening meal and taking my toddler to toddler groups and nothing excites me more than my little boy running out of school and saying, "guess what mummy, I am star of the week".

It is as if everyone assumes someone who stays at home immediately loses their brains. One of my co-researchers proudly showed my poem to friends and one said, “Wow that’s really good I can’t believe it was written by someone who is just a housewife” and I found that more of an insult than the complement it was intended to be; it highlights the negative connotations in ‘just’ and ‘housewife’. A pride in being at home feels like a suggestion that mothers should not work, a feeling I certainly don’t have and signifies an ‘all or nothing’ situation implying we devote ourselves in our entirety in some sort of sacrificial homage to offspring.

My two primary (for I feel there are others) co-researchers loved the poem which is the biggest complement I could have, most importantly because they felt it represented their feelings as much as my own. I received two text messages after I shared it with them, one reading, “The poems brilliant, made me laugh and cry. What an honour to be the subject of a poem! Thank you. We should do more to celebrate surviving this motherhood lark!” and the other, “A feels really honoured and so do I. You are so clever and articulate. J loves it. It is all so true”. I keep telling them that this is their work as much as mine because it comes out of our conversations and the way we have worked through our insecurities and how we are viewed as mothers. We continue to reflect on our experiences and I have passed around the bits of literature I have found interesting. For example, we talked about our mothers and mothers in law and their feelings as grandmothers after I introduced them to a chapter on being a grandmother (Kitzinger, 1978). So often we complain about their interference (and there is a, probably unfair, reference about my mother in my poem) but for once we considered how they feel when they

want to offer what they feel is expertise, only to be shut out because we feel we know better and we recognised that in turn this will happen to us when we become, as Kitzinger, (1978: 213) refers to it 'ex-mothers' I am sure we will work through the experience of grandmotherhood together in years to come and complain that our daughters and daughters-in-law don't know what they are doing. We all feel that we are lucky to have each other's support and that we are bound for life by the bond our shared experience has created.

The understanding I have developed of my experience of motherhood and in particular the feeling of being judged and in turn the importance of peer support in helping me through the change in my life and my identity has resulted from researching through conversation. The creation of the poem was an illumination and a creative synthesis of my understanding which made me realise what I had been researching. While this is a result of my study, in ways it was the start as an identification of pre-propositional knowing which then prompted a re-search into how conversations between friends facilitated my understanding of the way I felt judged as a mother and the way their support helped me realise I am more valuable now than ever. This process exemplifies my research model as the finding has led to a secondary analysis of the experience.

#### The Process of Developing My Understanding

In a period of pre-propositional knowing at level one I was experiencing feelings of joy at a new life as a mother whilst becoming more aware of feelings of inadequacy. At level two conversations in my group of friends and ultimately co-researchers were often justifying our choices in how we approached parenthood, for example I



remember that when we were new mothers we often talked about how we had made the right choice in having our children young. We felt we were seen as young mothers even though we were all twenty-five, as those mothers around us at clinics and social groups were largely older and most of our friends saw parenthood as something they would not even contemplate for many years to come.

Our conversations over the years never ceased to return to ways in which we felt judged as mothers; particularly for being boring and disempowered by a reliance on our partners for financial support. Often as we sit around drinking coffee we vent our anger about people who think all we do is sit around drinking coffee all day. I see the way in which we continuously returned to these conversations as the organic emergence of the focus for the research into the importance of our camaraderie in the face of perceived constant criticism.

I approached a third level of inquiry by trying to write up something about motherhood but I could never find the right format, I tried writing a fictional 'day in the life' story, and examples of our conversations and then just an account of how my friends and I had experienced motherhood. Nothing seemed to encapsulate what I wanted to convey. It seemed there was so much I could not condense it to use as the small study I wanted to include as part of my wider thesis. I was trying to write up research when I had not actually reached that point in the process. I abandoned the idea of researching motherhood thinking I was perhaps looking for a research project that had never been there. I returned to my main study of methodology which provided a period of incubation. During this incubation I was sat in the university library and I cannot remember what I was reading about but it

was nothing to do with motherhood when some words came into my mind and I began writing in a big green notebook. I wrote my poem all at once, not stopping for breath or to change a single word and there it was, as it appears above. This was certainly an illumination and immediately I felt ‘yes, that’s it; that is what I have been trying to put my finger on in reflecting on my experience of motherhood.’ It all seemed to fit together; the importance of the support of my peers in working through the feeling of judgement.

As written above my co-researchers felt the poem reflected the way that they felt as much as it reflected my own experiences and I have repeatedly reminded them that it is the result of a joint research process. However, it seems they view it as a piece I have written and I think there is a distinction between the way I have used collaborative inquiry here and in collaborative inquiry groups. In this research I was always aware that I was researching in some way even though my part in our conversations and our relationship was as a friend rather than a researcher. My co-researchers were not reflecting on our conversations in the same way and so this was my research informed by the understanding we developed together. In a collaborative research group all members of the group are included in the process from the start and may all contribute to a group representation of the findings.

The motherhood study is illustrative of the way meaning is transformed through all three levels of the model as I went through an individual research project, informed by our level two conversations which resulted in a creative output (a level three process) which I shared with my co-researchers and they then began a process of

reflecting on their own experience (their level one process) as I propose in chapter 6. There was then a cycle through the levels of inquiry and this cycle continues in the way we reflect, talk, read, and for me, write. I believe all research operates on all three levels of my model but there will be varying degrees of individual (level one) and collaborative (level two) process.

I had originally wanted to do some sort of research into being a mother feeling the resource of my two friends would be useful but the research became about that relationship. I wonder now, as I write this, whether this is about my interest in relationships. I researched belonging for my undergraduate dissertation but the group research projects I have been involved in always returned to the relationship in the group, this could still be my influence I suppose. Perhaps my method, in line with my interests, is a method for researching humans relating. I discuss in the following chapter that this is also a model of communication and this idea makes sense, given my background and that relating is essentially communication. I have only recently become aware of the fact that my academic roots are in the field of human communication and that I am actually still researching firmly planted within that soil.

Following the creation of the poem (which was both a level three process as an explication of the experience and my understanding but also a level one process in the way it was an illumination that allowed me to reflect further) I kept it to myself and reflected on how it represented my feelings and my experience. I think I took some time to be aware of the conversations I had with my co-researchers to see

whether I still believed my poem was a representation of our group experience as well as my own. I then shared the poem, by reading it to one co-researcher and she passed it on to the other. This level three activity allowed a level one process for the co-researchers as they reflected on their own experiences and for me as I thought about the poem as a representation of our group experience rather than my individual experience of our group.

We had developed understanding individually as a level one process which transformed to level two through feedback and discussions about how the poem represented our experience. This was characterised by re-visiting our earlier conversations. Again this inspired a level one process as I considered how my understanding had been developed, and for example, I thought about how our conversations throughout our journey of motherhood had actually influenced our experience of it; how much had we affected the way each other felt? I suppose this is part of the way we build our understanding and the influence cannot and should not be measured for it is a natural process. Essentially I researched the meaning of motherhood as it had been informed by my peers and through our conversations (level two), my perceived societal assumptions, for example as influenced by news items on motherhood and the latest research on motherhood 'best practice' (level three), and through reflection on my interaction with these contributions to my understanding (level one). Being aware of the importance of relationships in my experience of motherhood is the focus I have actually been researching and the awareness of this influence is the principle finding of the study.

My final stage is the level three process of writing this chapter. This is also a level one process as I am reflecting on the research and my personal journey in developing my understanding. I do not feel I have done the research justice here, although I still feel the poem encapsulates my experience perfectly. There is so much more I could write about both in terms of the process and the subject, but as I was once told, that's a PhD in itself. My worry is that I do not give an adequate illustration of my research model or an adequate portrayal of the importance of my support network as a mother. I suppose that is not for me to tell.

So there is another stage for I also reflect on what I have written in questioning the usefulness of this study and what it may contribute to knowledge about motherhood. I believe even this small expression of my experience can play a part in a dialogue about being a mother. Although I recognise studies that provide a more comprehensive picture including many women's stories (for example Devlin, 1995, Kitzinger 1978) my study offers a new story and an illustration of how I have processed this story in developing my understanding of my experience of motherhood. The immense importance of peer support is highlighted through my research as is my feeling of being judged.

In reading through this piece of work it is clear to me that this is a piece of communication research. This research is about the way that the people around me communicate with me as a mother and more importantly how I receive this communication. There are friends who share this identity and indeed form part of my interpretation of it, and also friends who I perceive as seeing me differently and with whom communication has been very much affected by our lives bending in different directions. I have not felt I have been able to be open with them about the

changes in our relationship, which creates an uncomfortable feeling between us; something I would never have thought was possible. My relationship with my family has changed and my way of communicating with my parents, I now spend time with my mum as an equal and I spend more time with her. There are so many avenues around this one experience of motherhood where there is scope to research and to increase understanding of human communication and relationships; this really confirms my feelings about the importance of communication and relationships in the way we understand our lives and therefore my feeling that using communication process as a research method (which my model is built upon) is appropriate and useful.

### *Work Apnoea*

The work apnoea study was based on my working through my difficulties in writing up my research through (ironically) a process of writing as introspective exploration. I give extracts of this writing in Arial.

It's taken so long and that is a major part of the problem. In theory this should speed me up, make me get it done quicker but instead I freeze, I am paralysed by fear, go into panic, find it difficult to breath, something is pressing on my chest, I just wish the thing pressing on my chest was an eighty thousand word thesis.

So why the fear? And it is fear: I am scared of my own work, scared of doing the work, no not scared of doing the work I think it is more about doing

it and it being no good. The longer I leave it the more I panic, the more I panic the longer I leave it, and the longer I leave it the more I become detached from it, I forget what I was doing and have no confidence in what I can do. It is all slipping away from me and the faster it slips the harder it is to grab – break for Oscar crying and to see if I can do some.

I had a conversation with my mother-in-law, Pam. It started by her asking how the writing up was going and so I started with my usual, 'well it's not really, I've had a busy week' but then I began telling her about the problems I have with getting it done, the way I enjoy doing it but there is this barrier. I told her about this, that I was trying to research the problem as a way of sorting it out. She talked about the way she experiences the same thing, the way she can't do anything until she's up against a deadline and the way the act of having to hand something in means you have to do it and we discussed the way that I feel I am never satisfied with what I've done and that I never feel it's finished but that having a deadline means that you have to let go of the piece of work so this gives you a finishing point. Writing this I thought of something re the research but now I can't remember what it was...oh the things that are lost! The important things which are lost when one is trying to do something important! It might be something I've thought of earlier and I might have written it down somewhere. That's another thing I keep thinking I've come up with something new and then I find I had that idea two years ago. Ah but

remembering it is re-visiting it and this is a way of verifying it's importance in the first place so maybe it's o.k. See a lot of these things that present themselves as barriers to me are actually useful elements of the process so finding I already had an idea that I thought was new, finding someone already came up with a theory I thought was mine (e.g. hermeneutics) but then that affirms that I have a valid point, what about not wanting to do it? Is that throwing me back into the 'real world' to gather more experiential data? Pam pointed out that I was always thinking about the research and therefore even not doing it was doing it. She also suggested that not wanting to hand anything in or produce drafts was my way of perfecting my work, I laughed saying I had never really strived for perfection but she had a point in that I'm scared of it being wrong or not good enough or more importantly not valuable and when someone is interested in my research I get a boost and I'm enthusiastic and I usually get something done. So I think maybe all this stuff is applicable to other people, lots of people must suffer this inability to do work disease (perhaps more commonly known as laziness) 'work apnoea' it could be called, maybe it has already been discovered! If it has I wonder if there's a cure!

I started my PhD with enthusiasm and confidence. I had found my niche, I was good at something, I felt happy and comfortable in the university environment and I couldn't believe that I was writing for a living (in a way). Then it slowed down. A combination of factors I suppose, I had some negative feedback on some work, I ended one relationship and started another and my nine 'til five, five days a week



attitude to my work slipped to ten 'til three, three days a week and then further.

Then I fell pregnant just as the end of my PhD was coming into sight.

Although all the changes in my life had some impact on my work there has been a more internal problem preventing me from getting the document finished and I have named it 'work apnoea'. My problem has been writing up the research. I delayed starting the writing up process because I just felt I hadn't finished, I never felt I had done enough actual research especially in terms of 'testing' the model, I think now that I was still confined by traditional ideas about how research should be justified and presented. In January 2005 I wrote:

Today I have been doing some writing but the problem is how much mundane detail to write up. It is probably not mundane to the reader and is really quite essential but it takes me back to the structure issue again.

I am stressed out again about how little I have done over the years in the way of testing the model and data collection stuff. I don't know if I have enough material but I suppose I am just going to have to write and fill in the gaps later.

I met a fellow post-graduate researcher today and we were both really excited to find someone else in the same position as us i.e. the lonely business of researching and we were surprised at how much our projects had in common so maybe she can help me keep going. The thing is she does something called 'organic inquiry' and a quick look on the net has revealed that a lot of stuff I say has already been said – yet again. So this puts me back in the enthusiasm and faith in myself stakes. I am just not willing to let everything I have done go down the pan and will have to

fashion some kind of PhD out of all this. I need to develop fighter spirit and I need to work and work to finish this thing.

The tone of this extract shows how much confidence has to do with my ability to write. Sometimes I feel like I really don't know what I am talking about and that my work is of no value, that I have nothing new to contribute and that I can never get my PhD finished. At other times I get really excited about my work, I feel like a genius and at these times I am inspired to write and I know that I am capable of producing something good. When I am the idiot rather than the genius I cannot even look at the computer.

So I had come up against this problem and it took me a while to realise that is was actually a problem. I thought it was laziness (and to an extent this is how it started) but actually I was experiencing a physical freezing, a fear of sitting down and writing, as described in my opening extract. It is only now that I marvel at the fact that it is the writing that I find impossible to do and writing is something I have always loved, I always had the ability to write, I enjoy letting words flow onto a page. Perhaps this is part of the problem; suddenly I had to structure my words. Academic writing means making sense, being able to stand up to scrutiny and this is where I have the backbone of worm. I have always written, since being a little girl. I used to write stories before I could even write, I would draw pictures (or what I thought were pictures) and dictate the story to my mum so she could write in the words. I copied passages out of books just because I enjoyed the act of writing so much and I would write poems and hide them away.

The thing is I could never bear for anyone to read anything I had written. I was about fourteen when I wrote a short piece about a neighbour who had been like a

grandfather to me, it was some years after his death and it fell out of my bag and when my mum and a friend read it they laughed and cried and said I should pass it on his widow. Of course I never did, writing this makes me realise quite how deep rooted the problem could be. The problem is the fear of having something that is so important to me evaluated and criticised. When I came to write up my PhD this was the point at which I had to do justice to all the work I had done, to show I was worthy of a PhD and that is the point at which I froze. My usual haphazard character suddenly wanted to produce something perfect.

From the start of my research I was driven by the idea that I needed to find a way of representing research that was appropriate to the subjective methods I was using. I was waiting to find a new way of representing research and really I have come back to just writing in way that feels right for the individual project I am writing about. Trying to find a way of structuring the document delayed the process of actually doing it because nothing felt right. In addition, and perhaps this is important, in recent months I have felt ready to write up, I feel like I have finished, like I have reached a point at which I am happy to write about where I am now and for all my regrets about how long it has taken me to finish I don't think that two years ago I knew what I know now and although this knowledge may have developed as a result of the writing up process I have a feeling that something has clicked in the last year, a period of incubation has resulted in an illumination in which my understanding of the research slots into place and I have been able to visualise the document and how I will write it in a way that makes me get excited when I look at my list of chapters.

### The process of developing understanding

My research into Work Apnoea has been a personal project predominantly operating on level one of my model as it has been an introspective study and one from which I sought a practical outcome: I wanted to find a solution to my problem. My method of inquiry, and indeed therapy, has been writing. It is interesting that I have used writing to solve the problem of not being able to write but this is partly why it has been useful. When I have felt the work apnoea building and I avoid even looking at the computer I force myself into the seat and start writing about not being able to write. Often I would abandon the writing on work apnoea and switch to my latest chapter, the very act of typing helping me to move forward. The process of reflecting on feeling unable to write also helped me to realise why I was experiencing these problems and once I knew why, I could write again.

Although this study was about my own experience I was surprised to find that people around me identified with the problem. Firstly my mother in law said that she felt afraid of finishing her work as illustrated in the first extract. Then I was on holiday with my parents and some of their friends and we were sat drinking coffee one afternoon when the subject came up. My mum is an artist and one friend a writer while another was completing a course at university. I talked about my problem and was surprised when everyone seemed to experience it in the same way. My mum suffers the same anxieties about her work being judged and this stops her painting, sometimes for years at a time and I had never realised this before. The writer said she could not start work until the house was tidy and this was something I find hard as well, it is as if everything around me has to be done and perfect before I can start, even today I had to clean before I could start work. This is a way of

putting off sitting down and starting to write but all the women in the group seemed to agree and two pointed out their husbands (both writers) would sit down amongst the papers and just get started. Suddenly I did not feel like there was something wrong with me and I also realised that I could not just say ‘I don’t feel I can do it’ because other people feel like this and just get on and do it, so I went home and put off doing any work for another week.

It seems there is something about writing within a certain structure. I have always joked that I am no good at filling in forms and that this is like one huge form. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 735) share part of a conversation they have had between them in which Ellis echoes this avoidance of writing in certain ways saying,

I’ve already agonised over writing the section on ‘what is autoethnography?’  
You know how I resist doing this kind of writing. At the same time I know it’s important.

I have found it easier to write after finding a structure for the thesis that I am happy with and reaching a place where I feel I know enough to write each chapter. I sometimes resist writing the things that I have written before; it is as if I lose interest when I am not writing something new, as if writing needs to be a process of discovery for me.

In identifying a problem in my research project I created a new research project and one with a practical outcome. The most important outcome of my work apnoea study is that it has helped me understand my anxieties and move on with my writing. In highlighting the importance of the practical outcome Heron (1996: 101) writes, “anything written down is secondary and subsidiary”. Although the

practical outcome is important it seems the problem of work apnoea is not unique to me. I have heard so many cries of agreement when I talk about it with others that there must be something useful in my findings for other researchers, writers, artists and those who are regarded as lazy when in fact they may be afraid of trying hard because their best may not be good enough. As I write this I can think of people who would fall into this final bracket.

Perhaps the problems regarding the way I represent my research which have driven my work apnoea are in fact a necessary evil of the model I suggest. As I believe the representation of findings should be appropriate to the subject and method of the study (see chapter 6) there will never be a prescriptive way of representing findings which means researchers must explore ways to communicate their understanding with the audience, this makes level three of the research process as much of a journey of discovery as levels one and two. My research into work apnoea has been more influential on my wider study than I had realised! In reflecting on my research I can see how the meaning of work apnoea has transformed through three levels from my own intra-personal process to an understanding developed by hearing other people's stories and their feedback on my ideas and then to a third level where I have found a way to communicate the understanding that I have developed. Understanding how this has been achieved has been a second stage of analysis as discussed in chapter 5. This has fed into my understanding of the research process and the model.

## **Part Two: A Final Reflection on this Chapter**

The two studies explored here demonstrate ways of using the model. The outcomes have been transformative and developmental in that the motherhood study aided me in adjusting to becoming a mother through introspection and an informal collaborative inquiry and the work apnoea study had a practical outcome in solving my problem of work apnoea through a reflexive process. I realise that these two studies are in fact the same thing, in some kind of a way; they are about not being good enough. I am not good enough as a mother and not good enough as a researcher. So often I comment, in moments of feeling low, that I don't feel I do anything properly. Perhaps these two projects are one and my research is about feelings of inadequacy. Perhaps I feel I am worth less as a mother because this has resulted in my failure as a student in not finishing my PhD.

It is interesting that I define myself as a housewife throughout the earlier part of this chapter rather than recognising that I am also a postgraduate student/researcher. Is that about the idea that I am failing as a student so I must become the perfect mother? How can I ever distinguish one research project from another? After all these projects are part of the wider PhD study which in turn was influenced by my undergraduate research into belonging and the group research into life stages and the more I think about it the more every piece of research I have been involved in rolls into one long study, into what? Research? Life? Relationships?

Communication? All of the above I suppose. In ways I could see this as one long study of belonging as through my reflections on motherhood and work apnoea I recognise the way my feelings of judgment as a mother represent the way I lost a sense of belonging in my change in identity, losing my identity as a young and

social woman and gaining the identity of 'mother'. In gaining the motherhood identity I formed new feelings of belonging with the comrades I researched with.

My work apnoea also represents feelings of losing a sense of belonging with the academy. In becoming a mother I lost a sense of place in the university and my feelings of inadequacy created feelings of not belonging with academics who seemed more deserving. This realisation of the role of identity and perceived ability and belonging in research is an important one. I see now that my experiences of motherhood and work apnoea have been more of a help to my research than a hindrance.

*Towards the end – Motherhood and Work Apnoea in the light of the resulting model and a resulting 'me'*

Reflecting on my 'side' research as my research comes to an end is interesting. In part it chills me that I was talking to about being ready to write up four years ago and that I did not progress much beyond this point from that time. In reality it is the pressing of an imminent and absolutely final deadline that has made me finish my thesis. For a long time I felt I needed to reach a point at which it felt 'finished' so I could write it without realising I had to write it in order for it to take form.

On reflection, as explained above, I see the two projects of work apnoea and motherhood as one aspect of my research process. I now realise the way in which they are not just related to my personal situation or my personal way of dealing with it but they are part of my research process. They are also the story of a woman's journey through becoming a mother whilst studying for a PhD and struggling



through the conflicting identities, the conflicting practicalities and the conflicting expectations that these two worlds present.

Kisner (2012: 427) writes of the 'schemes' that:

Set mothers up to feel inadequate enough to work ever more frantically,  
spread themselves ever thinner, regard themselves ever lower, separate  
themselves even further from nonmaternal identity

The difficulties I have faced are not specific to me, there are many women in academia, many women combining work, family and study as I have done. One shift in my identity is the clear way in which in the early part of my motherhood study I saw myself as a 'stay-at-home-mum' whereas since then I have worked part time. This has introduced a new dimension to my understanding. I have entered into the oft referred to world of 'juggling' work and family which seems to be focused on women (why don't men juggle – does this have something to do with multi-tasking? Groan). The new dimension to my understanding comes from new ways I can criticise myself as being 'not good enough' or not able to fulfil any of my roles as I should. Coupled with this is the expectation (self-inflicted or otherwise) that I should be able to excel in work, in my research and as a mother.

Munoz (in Espino et al, 2010: 807) writes,

I know people think I am able to juggle my identities without much effort,  
but the truth is I often feel like a ship in the open sea, sailing without its  
navigation equipment trying to find its destination. I don't want anyone to  
know I was lost or that my juggling act often becomes too difficult.

My experience of motherhood is one that differs from a feminist struggle for the freedom to work. Perhaps mine is a modern struggle where the cultural pressure is to 'have it all'. Being someone who does have it all; flexible work, family, and

the ability to pursue my personal learning, I think this appearance of having it all becomes a burden because the feeling of being privileged leads to a feeling of not wanting to say all can be too much.

So in considering how I have attributed meaning to being a mother I recognise the level three influence of cultural expectation. This could equally be considered a level two understanding as it is not a culture that is 'out there' but one which I interact with in a co-creation of meaning. My own insecurities 'buy into' a way of thinking which is reinforced by friends, family, so called 'media', the work place and the institution of academia. In engaging in this striving for having it all I equally engage with the possibility of failure – the notion of juggling implies that if not skilled we might drop one, if not all of our balls.

This leads to questions about, not just women, but men in a working world where home pressures are not congruent with work life. Not only is there a change in women's working lives but in men's home lives. Women work and men play a more active role in the home. Entering parenthood subjects us to great demands. Martinego et al (2010) discuss the way in which fathers increase working hours and pressures to better support their families to the detriment of their home life, whereas mothers are more likely to have an increased burden in the home which affects their work life. No doubt there are personal benefits that outweigh these issues but how, in this lifestyle do we find space for research if it is an addition to everyday paid work? In the coming years with the potential for cuts in research funding, particularly in the

social sciences, the likelihood is those with research interests will need to pursue these as an addition to paid work rather than as part of paid work.

Although not wanting to fit into the statistic I must admit the picture Martinego et al (2010) paint represents my own family picture. Despite being married to a man who was convinced he would be a househusband having married someone with better career prospects and a greater drive to achieve them than him, I became the one who shelved my work (quite literally in boxes full of PhD materials). The reality of our first baby was that I just did not have a job at the time. There were practical realities of pregnancy and breastfeeding that formed part of the need for my husband to take the full time job and I had a PhD to finish.

Personal circumstances aside, throughout pregnancy, birth and beyond there is the (yes physical but later reinforced) attachment of the baby to the mother. After giving birth and while still in the hospital the baby is exclusively the responsibility of the mother; to the extent that fathers are excluded outside 'visiting' times. While this may be for many practical reasons it also feels like a hangover from the time when the birth of babies really wasn't men's business. This felt like such a lonely time for me; suddenly we were a family but I was on my own and there began the restrictions on my freedom and a change in equality between my husband and myself. This was not about one of us being oppressed by the other but about us not having the same roles which characterised our previous, parallel lives.

I love being a mum. But sometimes as my husband goes out of the door I watch him go with jealousy; jealously because he can leave in the morning and focus on his work for a full eight hours. I will have to take care of two other people before I can set off to work and I will arrive flustered, just in the nick of time with no space to collect my thoughts. I will be equally as rushed in finishing work, having to get back to get the children from school, and often being late and feeling bad. Fitting in around the children and my paid work my PhD research has had to be completed in snippets and I can never fully engage. I know that equally as he leaves for work my husband turns around and looks at me with jealousy, because rush or not he wants to see the children run into school and he would like to pick them up from school and make the tea. Our divide in roles is financial. It is his wage we could not afford to lose and so his work is seen as more crucial; a PhD which earns us nothing in the day to day slips down the list of priorities.

I do not explain the above as a *reason* for the time it has taken me to complete my PhD but the way in which the everyday has snatched away at time has meant it disappeared without me noticing it. There are, however, issues that are related to my role as a mother that relate to the psychological inability to move forward. The gaps in my studies where I became and focused on being a mother left me coming back to my research feeling uncertain about myself and my abilities. I reflect in the earlier part of the chapter about feelings of judgement in motherhood and what should be an empowering process, in so many ways makes you feel vulnerable. Suddenly you are ‘cared for’ by midwives and everyone around you. I became financially ‘dependant’ even though this was on someone who never failed to protest that

the money was as much earned by me as by him. The fragility that is imposed upon you in pregnancy and post-natal somehow sticks. Then you return to a world that has moved on, you feel you have almost missed the chance to catch up and now you have to do so with your time divided. I started to cower. I wandered the university corridors feeling I should not be there – like I was an intruder. I wanted to rush home to where I knew what I was doing. I just wanted to be there – at home. The forced incubation (quite literally in the sense that I became an incubator) gave birth to work apnoea.

Had I returned to a stack of data I could analyse or write up I think I would have found it easier to pick up where I left off. But I wasn't where I had left off and this was a subjective study. I had to re-engage with my learning process and it did not feel quite as valuable as when I left it.

In reflecting on this I see why this process of becoming detached from the research and returning to it became so valuable. In returning I was able to gain new insight. A forced period of incubation had allowed ideas to brew and simmer and I could return to my earlier assumptions and reflect on their creation. In addition I had changed in the changing of my identity and subtle changes arising from my time away from the research allowed me to approach it from a changed perspective.

In researching work apnoea I have discovered a facet of the research process. This has not been a barrier but a way in which I have, quite rightly, questioned my assumptions. Work apnoea has been about a fear of my work being 'not good enough' and as such is a healthy, normal and constructive process.

Reflecting on my anxieties has allowed me to see, like the influence of 'what a

mother should be', the influence of embodied ideas about what research should be. Despite religious commitment to the notion of subjectivity, a continuous search into the validity of subjective forms of research, and an embracing of creative forms of representing research I could not see how my study could be formed into an acceptable PhD study.

I kept repeating to my supervisors 'but I haven't done anything, I haven't researched anything, I haven't found anything'. This was down to my feeling there was an absence of 'data', I had not done any 'analysis' and my 'findings' seemed to be based on ideas I had years ago. I may have identified a model where I claimed method should be identified retrospectively and subjective experience should be embraced, but when it came down to it, it was certainly easier said than done.

There have been countless years of subjective and introspective research development. In looking at my literature review I am building on ideas from the 1950's onwards. Yet there are still 'methodological straightjackets' to squeeze into in the forming of a document. Doloriert and Sambrook (2011) talk of the difficulties of fitting an autoethnographic piece into the structures and cultures of the institution and thesis requirements.

Ironically teasing out and simplifying elements of my experiences has enabled me to understand them and feel in a position to make statements about my research that suggest a contribution to knowledge. Perhaps the idea of writing in new ways to explore experience (Richardson, 1994; Ellis, 2004) doesn't just apply to the researcher moving from structured writing to unstructured writing

but also moving, when accustomed to more creative forms, back into the structured format.

As a level three understanding of the way in which my work apnoea has been fuelled there is the extensive writing on the patriarchal structures of academia (Cook and Fonow, 1988) and the way this represents a masculine approach to research and writing which Lather (1993) refers to as being about objectivity rather than a feminine approach which is more focused on engagement and self-reflexivity. In part my anxieties about my work not being finished and adequate reside in the way my research does not fit into the dominant, male, research framework. I have developed, for myself 'unrelenting standards' (see for example, Young et al, 2003), an internal schema of constantly pushing the standard I feel I need to reach. In doing so I have never reflected on what I have as a research study rather than what I think I need to have until the point where I have had no choice. My self-inflicted and other-related difficulties in the research process are, to some extent at the very least, gender related in the boundaries I have placed around myself on my journey to 'complete'. Perhaps it is the notion of 'completion' that has proved difficult as I have always felt research is a never-ending process; illustrated by the way I talk about this research as a continued study of belonging (above).

The experience of becoming a mother and becoming a researcher is intertwined and they are both never-ending processes. These are two parts of me becoming my adult self. These are the two parts of me in which I have doubted myself the most and I am not a person who usually enters into negative ways of thinking; I

am notorious for my laid back and positive take on life but here I have met my doubts. Key to these doubts is the idea that I abandoned my research for my children and I have abandoned my children for my research. Delgardon Bernal (2008, cited in Espino et al, 2010) talks of ‘Trenzas’ as the intertwining of personal, professional and communal identities. My identity does not have to be split into me as the product of a family and educational upbringing, me as a mother, and me as an academic and so neither does my research, my work and my life. There is a question about how we embrace our subjective experience and our understanding as developed through lived and professional experience and situate it within an academic discourse to allow our understanding to be a source of understanding for others. It is this question that this PhD highlights and addresses, even if it is just by offering one small suggestion. The following chapter discusses this premise.



## Chapter 9 – Application, Uses and Limitations of This Study

In this chapter I make the case for my contribution to knowledge in the form of the model and the processes included within it which facilitate personal growth and the development of this into informative research. I question how this model could be used by others and I also address the limitations of the study.

This study grew out of my own interest in approaches to research that included practices that engaged me. My experiences led to me seeing the potential for conversation, creative practices, collaborative groupwork, introspection and writing and reading processes to be combined as model for research that illustrates my own research process but that can also inform others.

This model is not a revolutionary ‘new’ model (although it does make new contributions as discussed below) in the sense that I have built on established methods and methodologies that promote 1) The related processes of subjectivity, reflexivity and introspection; 2) the notion of working *with* people rather than doing research *on* people and 3) the representation of research that is engaging, creative and leads the reader/audience into a process of understanding.

### *Subjectivity, Reflexivity and Introspection.*

Subjectivity is the way in which our understanding is based on our own interpretation, from our own frame of reference, which has developed out of academic discipline and perspective, our view of the world, our experiences, our

situation in any given society, culture and community and so on. There is a long established position of embracing this subjectivity rather than trying to develop a degree of objectivity. This is explored in the literature review in reference to the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Moustakas (1961; 1990), Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Reason and Rowan (1981) among others.

Reflexivity is the reflection on subjectivity to increase researcher awareness of their influence on the research, for example demonstrated by Stephenson and Lowenthal (2006: 450):

I pondered over which descriptions I had given primacy to and which I had marginalized, hence distinguishing that voice.

Reflexivity offers further depth to the research as the very reflection on the researchers' situation in relation to the research subject can be a method in itself. For example, Spry (2001: 710) says autoethnography is, 'a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context'

Introspection is a further process of delving into subjective experience in order to understand it, but also to uncover meaning and experience which forms a tacit understanding which was not previously 'known' to the researcher (for example through heuristic research, Moustakas, 1990)

*Working with people rather than doing research on people.*

Co-operative experiential inquiry establishes an approach to research that allows this working 'with' people. Other researchers are also finding ways to develop active collaborative research, where the actual inquiring is done with and between people through conversation (e.g. Feldman, 1999; Cochran-Smith and

Lyte, 1993 and Hollingworth, 1994). This opens new possibilities for qualitative research as there is scope for the democratisation of the research process and the ability to gain, not just one subjective and introspective insight but many; thus creating intersubjective research.

*The representation of research as a catalyst to understanding.*

Evocative autoethnography creates active involvement from the reader which Ellis and Bochner (2012: 431) characterise as, 'I want to linger in the world of experience, you know, feel it, sense it, taste it, live in it'. I have understood this as a process of passing on an illumination (Moustakas, 1990) to an audience, where they engage with it tacitly and empathically (thus they feel it, sense it, taste it experience Ellis and Bochner write of). I have drawn on hermeneutic philosophy in the development of this theory in recognising this tacit process could be seen as a leap in understanding on the hermeneutic circle (Palmer, 1969) where the reader will then interpret the 'illumination' in terms of their own understanding.

Meeting the aims of the study

On transfer from MPhil to PhD my aims were revised to focus on the following:

1. To create a methodological model for subjective/introspective and/or collaborative research.
2. To 'test' the effectiveness of this model in terms of informative, developmental and transformative outcomes.

This was building on interim findings from the earlier stages of the study in addressing the MPhil aims:

1. To investigate how introspective research methods can be used in understanding human nature.
2. To question the role personal growth plays in research.
3. To consider how subjective research is presented to and received by an audience.

The investigation following these early aims had resulted in the formulation of the interim model. The themes represented in these aims remained key features of the study and their influence on the resulting model is evident. Personal growth has become a key process in the research model and my consideration of ‘how to’ present research has changed to a focus on how I engage with research and how I can understand the transfer of understanding to an audience as a process. This shift from a focus on ‘how to’ to a focus on ‘how do I’ is perhaps representative of a change in research question from ‘what makes it research?’ to ‘how do I make it research?’

In addressing the PhD aims I have formulated an interim model for inquiry (as presented in chapter 4). This was a methodological model that built on the literature regarding introspective and collaborative research (as highlighted in the literature review) and my experiences of approaches to research to that point (as told in chapter 2).

My approach to ‘testing’ the model was to explore the research process through the three levels identified in the model. This was more an approach of delving more deeply to discover more understanding of the model than a ‘testing’ process. This

is much more in keeping with this study as an openly subjective inquiry and it reflects the model (and has fed back into it) in that I advocate a process of retrospectively identifying how it is we have come to understand what we understand as a result of inquiry.

The second phase of the research involved this re-search of the experiences and processes leading to my understanding of research as operating on three levels. This was not only through re-searching my original experiences but also through my engagement in further inquiry groups and through the introspective inquiries of motherhood and work apnoea (chapter 8). This resulted in the identification of key processes that aid a 'transformation of meaning' through the three levels of inquiry leading to the development of understanding. In becoming aware of the processes, it highlighted that the model is not illustrating a linear process but a complex and fluid experience in which meaning is transformed as understanding is developed across all levels concurrently and mutually.

A third phase of research, and one which I was not previously aware would be such an informative process has been the writing of this thesis. This required further reflection on my process and the way I had developed my understanding of the model; this led to further changes. In recognising the indescribable process of the second phase of research I needed to return to the model as a way of reflecting on three separate levels of inquiry to understand the parts of experience that had made up the whole of my tacit knowing of the process.

In summary I have met the original aims of my study, both the early aims in the way that they have contributed to the understanding that *is* the interim model and

the revised aims which highlighted a need to formalise this model and reflect on it as an effective approach.

I have specifically addressed each aim as follows:

1. To investigate how introspective research methods can be used in understanding human nature. *Throughout this study I have explored my use and other people's use of introspective methods through my own reflection and my engagement in conversations and the reports of other (mostly undergraduate) researchers. I have found introspective methods provide a deepening of the individuals own understanding of their experience which enables them to make this explicit in their communication of resulting understanding.(discussed in chapters 4, 5 &7)*
2. To question the role personal growth plays in research. *Prior to this research it had become apparent through co-researchers' reports that members of collaborative research groups experienced personal outcomes of growth. Through this research I have examined the process of growth in collaborative research groups, for example identifying techniques such as the hot-seat and creative practices that enable greater sharing of experience. More importantly the creation of a climate for growth through encouraging a person centred approach to communication within the group leads to members feeling valued, accepted and safe in the group environment, thus allowing them to explore their experiences further. I have therefore focused on personal growth as a key process in research at both level one of the model and level two on recognition of similar reports of growth in individual inquiries. This also means that the model offers a way of transforming personal growth and learning into informative research.*

4. To consider how subjective research is presented to and received by an audience. *I have examined my own engagement with research outputs from the highly creative and subjective to the more traditional. Despite expecting my findings regarding the presentation of research to be about creative representation my resulting understanding is that the creative is necessary to convey the essence of an experience (mythos) but the more logical explanation of the process leading to the researchers understanding is also necessary (logos).*
5. To create a methodological model for subjective/introspective and/or collaborative research. *I have created a model as outlined in chapter 4 and expanded in chapter 6, influenced by my development of understanding regarding the above aims, and in turn helping to further develop my understanding of the processes which enable the transformation of meaning through inquiry which is enhanced by the personal growth of the co-researchers.*
6. To 'test' the effectiveness of this model in terms of informative, developmental and transformative outcomes. *I have not 'tested' the model through an empirical process but through the deployment of my own principles. I have reflected on my experiences and engaged in further research with others to see if the model continued to represent my understanding of the research process and how it enabled the research process in its practical application (see chapters 6, 7 and 8). The model continued to be effective in creating informative, developmental and transformative outcomes.*

The effectiveness of the model is evident in the completion of this study and in the key contributions I feel it makes as outlined later in this chapter. In chapter 7 I illustrated the potential for theory to emerge from the approach. I reflect on this and the limitations of the approach I have taken below.

#### The effectiveness of the model in this study

I have broken up my discussion of limitations. Here I will discuss the issues relating to this particular study and later I will point to limitations and considerations for the use of the model and related processes in future studies.

In part the time it has taken to finish this study and in particular the writing up element is due to the way I have entered a somewhat blind and chaotic process. Sanders and Wilkins (2010) suggest that chaos, as ‘structurelessness’ is a legitimate process but it took me a while to realise that the chaos does need to transform into clarity at some point. Researching a method while using the method leads to an entangling of subject and process. It has been an effective method of researching inquiry at levels one and two but communicating my resulting understanding and my process has been difficult. The illumination came when I realised I needed to return to the three distinct levels of inquiry rather than trying to explain the fluidity.

I have worked closely with many co-researchers and my use of their reports about the research process has been a key feature in the development of my understanding. In embracing the way in which the transformation of meaning becomes the analytical process and the way I absorb the stories into my



understanding I have not always kept adequate paperwork to illustrate my interactions with co-researchers and my responses to their reports. A clearer paper trail would have helped me in progressing to level three of my inquiry and though I expect the amount it would have added to the research process and this thesis would have been minimal it may have helped with some of my anxieties about what I had ‘done’ and enabled me to illustrate it more clearly. This raises issues for the use of a subjective approach where the path ahead is unstructured. If the path ahead is unstructured, then the path behind must be left in good order to allow steps to be retraced.

I am still feeling I have compromised in the way I have written this thesis. I advocate the use of writing that facilitates an empathic engagement but in this thesis I am often using a more structured approach. The principle exceptions are my reports on Motherhood and Work Apnoea. These stand as not only part of my research story but as examples of how research may be reported, and they represent my own preferred way of doing this. The use of a poem in representing the motherhood research shows how the creative can be used to communicate the felt understanding of phenomena, I also offer a fictional research group story as an appendix (appendix 8) which allows an audience to understand something of the group process which is an important factor in how collective understanding has developed.

In part the more traditional presentation of this thesis is due to the structures necessary for PhD submission and examination but it is also because the outcome is a model and it is necessary to clearly explain my process; I have had to tease out parts of the process to illustrate what I have done. Arguably this is the case for any

research and my revised understanding and explanation of level three process accounts for this. I have retained the personal story of this research in the implicit subjectivity and in chapters 2, 8, 10 and parts of chapter 6 where I allow myself some freedom in expressing my understanding as much as explaining it.

A limitation of this study with more ramifications for the resulting model is an unavoidable consequence of researching a method whilst using it. The processes I identify are in part identified because they represent my interests, the activities I include as research practices and the understanding I already have. For example, recognising empathy and personal growth comes out of my knowledge of counselling theory, my engagement in practices involving self and other reflection and my embarking on this study with a pre-conceived notion that personal growth was in some way beneficial to research. In short I am recognising processes because I am looking at them.

I can only address this limitation by referring back to the nature of subjective inquiry, in that this will always be the case and I am using my expertise to develop research (as I advocate for others). Although my understanding is based on certain subjective experiences and understanding these are ‘real’ experiences and the awareness of these, the awareness of subjectivity and the clarity that this is a subjective study is the way to mitigate against what could be a negative impact on the research and turn it into a positive element of it. Further to this any researchers wishing to adopt my model would also adapt it according to their own understanding, expertise and the focus of their inquiry, I am reminded of a play therapist who seemed unsure as to how to research her focus, I suggested she use

some of the methods she understood as play therapy which initially made her raise her eyebrows but then allowed her to start from the practice she was familiar with.

We interpret according to our experiences and understanding and we can also research according to our experiences and understanding. This is why I advocate the establishment of method as a reflexive process; to allow the researcher(s) to research in ways that feel appropriate and to allow a change in approach when it is useful. I look forward to the contributions to this model I feel other researchers could make.

Many of my realisations only came about because I began to engage in an adequate supervision process where I sought an outside perspective on my work. To engage in 'allowing others in' I had to realise that this was a process of collaboration and clarification rather than judgement. Considering I advocate the use of co-operative inquiry and conversation as a way of facilitating introspection and growth my inability to do this during the level three stage of my own study is surprising.

Seeking outside academic critique is one way in which the research has developed in its 'trustworthiness' This also shows that in engaging in level three of the inquiry we need to maintain both the introspection of level one and the collaborative nature of level two.

My reflections and my openness have enhanced the trustworthiness and I feel my portrayal of my own and other people's experience has been authentic both in the development of my understanding and the communication of it.

Where I have failed to be sufficiently reflexive is in addressing my issue of work apnoea as an on-going process throughout the research. Although becoming aware

of the way my self-doubt and doubt in my study were hindering my ability to write up my research I put this down to ‘it is because I am afraid it isn’t good enough’ and allowed myself to continue avoiding entering into a critical (in both senses of the word) process. Once recognising deeper meanings to work apnoea I was able to move forward. Firstly was the recognition of the way my fear of representing my work was due to the way I found the structures of the doctoral thesis to be unsuitable for the nature of my study (which I have suggested could be gender related if taking the stance that this study is feminine and therefore difficult to fit into patriarchal structures). This was a more perceived ‘inability to present it the way I am supposed to’ than an actuality. The second realisation was that in order to structure my understanding so it could be passed on to others I had to go through the process of reflecting on and clarifying my experience as a level three process in the final stage of my research. This has enhanced my study in the long run but perhaps that run didn’t need to be quite so long!

### Key Contributions Made by this Research

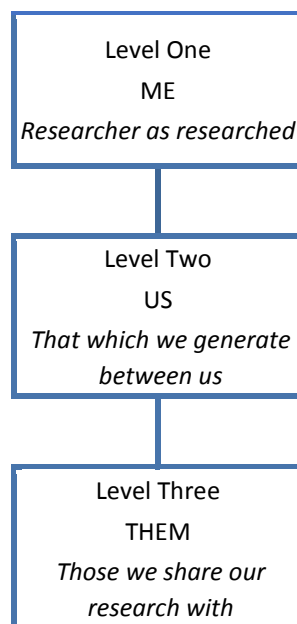
This research has been a subjective study of my own experiences of human inquiry involving the identification of processes and practices that have facilitated the development of understanding within the various inquiries involved. The individual nature in itself lends originality to the study, but in a field of subjective research that could be said of any project. Many of the processes I have identified are mirrored in alternative approaches to research and methodological theory. My way of arriving at similar conclusions offers new understanding that both establishes the strength of those claims but also

offers new applications for them. Beyond these re-conceptions which offer a contribution in themselves, there are certain elements of this study that make more ‘original’ contributions to inquiry. I see my key contributions as being:

- 1) A three level model for the retrospective establishment of method as a process of developing understanding in qualitative inquiry.
- 2) The identification of key research processes for the creation of informative research out of the personal growth of co-researchers. These are integral to the model but are also of relevance to other approaches.
- 3) The inclusion of the possibility of an elongated process in research which allows life and work responsibilities to compliment rather than restrict the research process.

An outline of these contributions in relation to pre-existing theory

1) The Model



My model is based on three levels of inquiry that make up a process of understanding in research. What has emerged is a model of inquiry that is intersubjective. This means that it is a process of studying one's own subjective understanding through engaging with other people's subjective understanding and in turn developing both. This has proved to facilitate personal growth which in turn enhances research outcomes.

There are existing approaches to inquiry which operate to some extent at all of the levels of inquiry I describe. Of organic inquiry Clements et al (1998: 127) write,

Analysis of organic data may be done by the researcher, by the co-researchers, and/or in the mind of the reader. The most personal and chthonic analysis is done by the reader as she or he reads the stories and identifies with them on an archetypal level.

They use sharing and responding to stories is as a research method with a reader role for the co-researchers as part of the research. My level three inquiry applies to a reader, not required to feed-back but nevertheless involved in a research process. The inclusion of a reader/feedback element is a useful one which I have not formally included in my model. I do, however, recognise this from the writing and sharing of individual depictions in research group 7. This is a valuable addition to the process.

Wilkins (2000) outlines a story-building model which involves the transformation of a story from an intra-psychic process, through amendment in the light of others stories and to an encapsulating story. The changing of stories in the light of stories reflects the transformation of meaning through the storytelling process. This model also offers a way of representing the outcomes of intersubjective research through the creation of a group story.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) in discussing action research, break it into three areas that bear alarming resemblance to my three levels. They suggest first person action research is an approach to improving our own lives and practice, that second person research is an endeavour to research with others into issues of mutual concern and that third person research involves a more impersonal engagement with a wider community (for example in achieving political change). Although describing these as different focuses for research Reason and Bradbury (*ibid*) state that the best research engages all three approaches. In my model the focus is more on understanding the experience than achieving practical change and the transformation through levels is the key feature which is not highlighted in Reason and Bradbury's theory but the models certainly mirror one another and as neither was informed by the other (I realised the similarities late in my research) it is interesting that we have arrived at such similar understanding.

Hermeneutic methodology includes the notion of transformation of meaning (although this is my wording) in understanding moving from the writer, to the text, and to the reader. Although this offers an explanatory process (beyond the level of this study) the model I describe allows research embracing these processes but within different research structures of group inquiry, individual inquiry and in writing, where the original emphasis in hermeneutic research is on reading.

The above approaches, if my model was applied to them (by way of comparison rather than implication of explanation), seem to represent (with the exception of action research) a level one (initiating researcher) understanding, followed by

level three (presentational) understanding, followed by level two (co-created) understanding. Following this there may be repeated cycles.

What I propose with the use of my model is that the entry point of the research could be at any of the three levels. Research might start with the reading of a text (level three → level one), an introspective or reflexive process (level one), a conversation or group encounter (level two) or the writing of a document (level one → level three) and so on. As a model for the retrospective establishment of method a researcher would not necessarily ‘decide’ which way in, and the organic emergence process would begin in no pre-determined way on any of the levels; it is more likely it would be a combination of them. The identification of pre-propositional knowing may establish both the way that research has begun and the way that the research can progress.

Co-operative experiential inquiry has been the foundation of my work in groups (although we departed from it in many ways) and this method is exemplary as collaborative research. In the model explored in this study each group members’ introspective process is emphasised. My three stage model can be used with differing levels of co-operation from a full co-operative inquiry where all co-researchers are involved in the conception and design of the study through to an individual inquiry where the researcher reflects on the elements of their understanding that were formed as a collaborative process.

The reverse of the relationship between my model and co-operative inquiry is true of the relationship between the model and heuristic research. Heuristic research is based on the introspective process of one researcher as influenced by engagement with co-researchers and their stories. When combining the depth of



exploration of heuristic research with the process of sharing that understanding through co-operative inquiry the potential for richness in inquiry is vast. This is also a way to apply the depth that can be found in introspective research to a greater number of co-researchers. The process explained in the following section illustrates how this intersubjective approach allows for research that is greater than the sum of its parts.

As a reflexive methodology autoethnography also provides depth in research coupled with richness in the way it is written and presented. The focus on evocative writing is a draw for me as this is a process I enjoy. Where my research differs from autoethnography is in the roots of the approaches; autoethnography is based on the creation of cultural representations of experience,

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739)

My own research is focussed on personal experience and the personal meaning of experience. I am also interested in the communication of experience and the development of the meaning that is attributed to it as a result of communication. Although the personal is very much reflected in autoethnography and the cultural is a key feature of research aligned to my model (as evident in my motherhood study) the distinction is in the priorities, the emphasis and the position from which the researcher enters the research. I also feel the more explicit inclusion of the experience and understanding of others included in my model allows the research to be opened out from the focus on academic researchers.

## 2) The identification of processes integral to the model

### *Organic Emergence*

I originally referred to the process of organic emergence as a process of actively becoming engaged in research without a clear focus, in faith that the focus will come. This can be the case, particularly in group inquiry where the co-researchers can establish themselves as a group and the research focus can emerge out of their being together and getting to know one another. I have also begun to think of organic emergence as occurring without our knowledge, where we slowly become more engaged in a particular area of interest.

In organic inquiry there is the ‘sacred’ stage where old ways of thinking are dug over to allow the sacred to emerge (Clements et al, 1998). This is a transpersonal methodology but I think of ‘the sacred’ as really being akin to some kind of tacit knowing. In this description, however, there is still intention to research a particular focus; the following stage is ‘planting the seed’ which is the initial concept or story for the inquiry meaning there is a purposeful engagement in a particular topic for research. There is the recognition in transpersonal research of a process I would include as organic emergence,

my students’ and colleagues’ research projects in topics such as reclaiming identity after abuse, the inward movement of beauty, the qualities of serenity and contentment in everyday life, the experiences of addiction and its impact on long-term relationships, and mutuality in relationships have all emerged from personal experience and a desire to share and amplify the experience through study of the experience of others.

(Anderson, 1998: 71)

Similarly Ellis and Bochner (2000) refer to the way their students arrive wishing to research something through more objective methods that is actually an interest that has arisen out of their own experience. In harnessing and reflecting on the way this interest has emerged using the three levels of inquiry of my model, research can begin which is focused on the interests and experiences of those involved; thus creating the potential for growth.

### *Transformation of Meaning*

This is the process by which understanding is developed as meaning transformed from individual to collective and to a form understandable to others. It is not necessarily in that order or configuration but could take any possible route through the three levels of inquiry. I noticed this process in the first collaborative inquiry group in relation to the way the group filtered meaning through conversation. I later, on reading Love (1995) picked up on the phrase ‘mutually transform’ and this seemed to explain our conversational process of analysis. I have since applied the idea of a transformation of meaning to movement between all levels: a transformation from individual to collective through conversation; transformation from written to level one experiential understanding through empathy; a transformation from personal or group understanding to understanding that can be communicated to an audience and so on. This is clearly derived from the hermeneutic circle (Schliermacher cited in Palmer, 1969), as part of this process is the comparing of the communication to something we already know. Allied to this are related processes of empathy, intuition and tacit knowing which I discuss below.

### *Intuition and Tacit Knowing*

These are two processes identified by Moustakas (1961; 1990) but also echoed in hermeneutic philosophy in the way the understanding of ‘the whole’ relates to tacit knowing and the notion of intuition as allowing for more immediate understanding as a result of pre-knowledge or pre-understanding (Gadamer, 1979). My development of understanding regarding these processes is in the transformation of meaning from a level three piece to a level one understanding when a researcher interacts with it. I describe this as the ‘passing on of an illumination’. The illumination moment where all seems clear is passed to the audience of a level three output. The illumination (as I see it) is the moment when both the whole and the parts become clear. This requires both intuition and tacit knowing, thus both evocative writing and clarity.

In level one inquiry this process of intuition and tacit knowing is as Moustakas (1990) describes it. At level two the interaction between co-researchers can be a process of facilitating the identification of the tacit and the use of the bridge of intuition to further explore it. One way of doing this is through the creative activities I have described in chapter 6. For example, in using an art therapy approach as outlined by Silverstone (1994; see chapter 6) co-researchers can use paint and colours to visualise their tacit knowing and the process of both visualising and explaining this creation relies on intuition.

Creativity also seems to open the mind, so new insights can occur, as Meekums (1993) suggests. Janesick (2001) talks of a ‘pas de deux’ between intuition and creativity. She illustrates the research process through the analogy of dance suggesting continual practicing of research techniques leads to them becoming

intuitive processes and this allows the researcher to develop creativity in their thinking and their approach, much like the dancer learns the steps and through intuition they are able to become creative in their act.

In reference to the communication of research as a level three process I have developed the notion of the subjective work being read subjectively and the process of intuition and tacit knowledge allowing the reader/audience to gain a tacit, felt sense of the experiencing person's story through intuition. This takes the form of the reader/audience relating what they read, hear or see back to what they already understand from their own experiences and learning. Although this is an established hermeneutic theory I apply it here to the way we need to consider research representations, not as accurate but as empathically engaging (discussed below)

### *Empathy*

Empathy relates closely to the above processes and again this is a much used concept but one I have applied to the research process and the movement of understanding between levels of inquiry. Empathy is characterised by the Hopi Indian saying, 'never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins' (anon). Rogers (1957) refers to empathy as 'understanding as if you were the experiencing person without losing the *as if* condition'.

In intersubjective research if we are to understand one another on a level that is akin to the depth of introspective insight then an empathic understanding is necessary. This way of listening and understanding keeps in focus the frame of reference of the experiencing person and in intersubjective research understanding the person is part

of understanding the experience. In groups this also facilitates a climate for growth (see below and chapter 6).

Evocative autoethnography is a way of doing and writing research that engages the reader empathically. I have suggested (chapter 6) that it is this empathic engagement that allows the processes of intuition and tacit knowing and thus the transformation of meaning from the researchers' understanding to the readers' understanding as a level one process in an experiential, tacit manner. Dilthy (cited in Palmer, 1969: 104) makes this point,

The human studies...have available to them something unavailable in the natural sciences the possibility of understanding the inner experience of another person through a mysterious process of mental transfer.

This transfer of the understanding of inner experience is empathy.

### *Personal Growth*

A key finding and a key contribution of this study is the establishment of personal growth as a research process and so a tool for research. I have written about this in reflecting on the first research group I was a part of (Mitchell-Williams et al, 2004; appendix 1) but this has also proved to be an important process in subsequent groups and in individual studies. Researchers using other approaches have alluded to this element of research, for example Wall (2006) talks of 'bending in new ways' and a feeling of autoethnography as an emancipatory process, Heron (1996) talks of transformative outcomes and Wilkins (2000) of developmental outcomes, but there is not, as far as I am aware a focus on the process of personal growth as a way of *doing* research. Back to that very early and inspirational question, '*what makes it*

*research?*’ and despite my answering this in terms of reflection on process (as suggested in chapter 5) this factor of personal growth is another example. Through personal growth we discover something about ourselves and we share this new learning with the research. In this very sense introspective and intersubjective process *is* a method of research. The processes I have identified above, and throughout this thesis, are all ways of facilitating growth for the development of research.

### 3) The model as encompassing the possibility of merging personal and professional experiences with academic research

This point is expanded in the section regarding the application of the model but I will reflect here on the way the motherhood and work apnoea studies shed light on the possibilities and the necessities for both research to be a process that can be elongated to accommodate life and work challenges and for the researcher to be aware of personal processes that affect their ability to be congruent in their reflections on their research.

There are many positive aspects to my elongated research process. I have done far more ‘research’ in the ten years of my elongated study than I would have done in three years. When I reflect on the understanding I had at the three year point this was a fraction of the understanding I have now. This is in part due to the breaks in my research forcing a period of incubation from which I could return with new insight and in part due to the changes in me personally and the maturing that came with aging and becoming a parent. Each time I returned to my research I needed to re-search my research and read through any writing, any notes and any literature

with which would come a new perspective. Even in my latest return to ‘finalise’ the writing the way I see the model and the process has changed, for example in the way I have moved from seeing the model as needing to reflect the ‘messiness’ of my process to realising as a level three process I need to return to a simple three stage model to allow me to clarify my process.

My life is not conducive to a calm environment where I can immerse myself in research and follow new threads in the literature, or in my thinking as they arise. The chaos and immediate demands of my home, and my work leave little space for immersing in research. Rather I have had to take moments when I can and then by the next time I returned to my research I needed to retrace my steps and go over all the work I did the last time. I know I am not the only person in this position as I am surrounded by others doing exactly the same thing.

I have managed to complete this study – in the end, and I feel it is all the better for the time I have been away and the time I have had to spend reviewing the point I had made a year earlier. My battle has been one of a mother and a researcher losing confidence in her work due to the time it was taking and the worry of not having the ‘currency’ to buy my way through. I was measuring my work against the wrong standard; the external, institutional, patriarchal standard. Of course I would have to fit into it eventually but this is a subjective study and first I needed to be satisfied with it myself and I ground myself down through a fear of failure and that I would be ‘found out’ as being an imposter in this world of academia. Again I am sure I am not alone and so this study sheds light on work apnoea as a level three research



process and on the insecurities that become embedded in such an exposing way of researching.

The model is one which proposes a different way of doing research (even if incorporating parts already established). The establishment of method as a retrospective process allows for a more fluid structure to the research. This has made my elongated process possible as the events seemingly outside my research have been able to inform it. This is a subjective study which means it is constantly changing through my changing experiences and understanding. At the same time the experience and understanding of the past does not cease to have an influence on my understanding even after years, births, deaths, jobs, poverty, riches, health and illness. Through this approach research *can* take longer and can incorporate the learning achieved through seemingly unrelated aspects of life, and if I had only known that I would have probably got it done much sooner!

In my desire to create a model for inquiry there was a research aim I was not aware of. Although inspired by what felt like truly revolutionary methods such as heuristic research and co-operative experiential inquiry I was searching for a way of inquiring that mirrored my personal ways of creating meaning and that was inclusive of the research processes I had encountered in my early individual and group research experiences. Here I have satisfied that need to understand and make explicit. My hope is that the model is one which allows others to be equally as subjective in their search through providing a way of conceptualising and making explicit the process. I see this as a way of transforming both professional and personal learning and growth into research. The three level framework allows the building of trustworthiness at all stages of the process through making clear, both to

the researcher and the audience, the way understanding has been influenced and formed.

### Application and uses of the model.

The difficulties in my research process as explored in chapter 8 have given me an insight into the possible applications of this model. Although I have no doubt that this model can be used as I have used it; to explore elements of a personal experience, I feel there is the possibility for it to be used to provide an accessible way of doing research for those who have anxieties about the feasibility of research due to the usual financial and time costs and the less obvious issues about confidence in entering an unknown academic world.

The problem with subjective and introspective studies is that we end up with a mountain of research about being an academic! While this is not usually the prime focus it does skew research into being about academics talking about our lives and thus the research pool becomes a bit limited. The important move in qualitative inquiry now is to see subjective and reflexive approaches move out into professional domains. I propose that the model I have outlined here could be used for research to become a part of practice; less research informed practice and more practice informed research,

Kirkham (1999: 189) writes of midwifery,

In any culture as a midwife's own story grows richer, she gains in repertoire and skill at effective storytelling...sometimes our stories, if we assemble

them rather than suppress them, challenge our textbook knowledge and can be complex.

I wonder how we can use these ‘stories’ as a building of understanding; embracing that which a professional develops in practice and in communication with others, as part of a research process. The drive in evidence based practice places expectations on practitioners to engage with research which is not always relevant and appropriate in the way it is conducted or what it ‘measures’ and the policies it results in, as discussed by Barth et al (2012) in terms of the difficulties social workers found when trying to implement science informed practices.

The three levels of my model could be used to situate the personal, subjective experience and understanding at level one, the experience and understanding from engaging with others at level two, and the academic and empirical research at level three. This allows the practical experience to form a key grounding for research and allows a practitioner who is not an academic to find a way into research that is empowering in privileging their understanding, but moves them towards considering the relation of this to current and historical ‘evidence’. In this way a case could be made for the ‘evidence’ to be generated as a reflexive process.

With the inclusion of organic emergence as a way of arriving at research a researcher can reflect on and include processes of developing understanding leading up to the active engagement in the inquiry. This allows prior experience to be included as part of the ‘data’. A practitioner wishing to research engagement with service users (as a broad example) could use their own reflections on their engagement with service users, and the way their interest had

developed in this area as a starting point. My own way in was through experience; the experience of self-reflection.

Much of my research practice has taken place within the university setting. I have used students as my co-researchers, not so much due to accessibility but because my understanding arose as part of the learning and then teaching process. I have researched in the way I am advocating; by situating it within my work and my life. On returning to associate lecturing the programme leader for the course said, 'it is all about a focus on research informed teaching' to which I replied, 'what I do is probably more teaching informed research'. I have already illustrated the idea of practice informed research in using my student and lecturing practice to inform this study.

The use of students could be considered a limitation of my study but it is interesting how motivated students have been to research in ways that allow them to tell their stories and explain their own experiences. It is no secret that heuristic research and co-operative experiential inquiry remain the dominant approaches influencing my way of working and thinking, yet their presence in published academic studies is not vast. There seems to be much more use of co-operative inquiry and heuristic research in unpublished undergraduate and postgraduate research, is this about these approaches as an accessible way of researching that allows researchers to build from their understanding? If so the amalgamation of the essence of these methods in my model allows for an accessible way in to research.

Although I have researched with students the approach can be used to allow people into the research as active agents even if they are not academics. In the reports I have studied one undergraduate researched co-operatively with young black people

in a south London youth club and a postgraduate researcher worked with students at an urban comprehensive using groupwork such as psychodrama.

Salmon (2012) introduces a volume on the use of phenomenology in nursing research, making a case for qualitative inquiry to not be seen as inferior to quantitative research in nursing. In this volume Kenny (2012) introduces heuristic research as an appropriate method and Pratt (2012) suggests hermeneutics as a way of developing nursing knowledge through lived experience. Quantitative studies may be useful in enquiring into practice on a wide, cause and effect scale but in researching practice regarding the intimacy of day to day interaction and the experience of nursing, research through the methods mentioned above and through the process I describe in my model could create a valuable body of study. These studies would not only enhance the practice of the researching practitioner but also provide an engaging, accessible and informative level three communication that other practitioners can identify with. This creates the potential for others to learn from these studies more deeply if they inspire reflection and a level one process for the audience as my understanding resulting from this PhD would suggest.

In research there is already a precedent for a transformational approach. Reason and Bradbury (2001: 2) explain, 'In action research knowledge is a living evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience'. As an approach based on researching within communities and institutions, action research shows the possibilities for situating research within practical experience. Action research is increasingly used in healthcare, social work and education as a way of improving practice (Koshy et al, 2011) As such my model could be used as a form of action

research but with more focus on the individual within the organisation and their subjective, yet informed interpretations.

In addition to practitioner research this model is appropriate to those wishing to engage in research who either find the process intimidating or the restrictions of time and money limiting. Burton (2012: 227) illustrates in her paper on women in the PhD process,

...the importance of researching what matters personally, of situating the focus of doctoral study – a long-term, solitary, potentially life-changing project, after all for men as well as women – in the heart of one's daily as well as professional life.

My approach is suitable for people like myself, who are unable to immerse exclusively in the research process; who find themselves on the margins of academia and therefore unable to situate research as part of a wider, paid role; whose lives involve caring responsibilities, as in so many cases for men and for women; and for those who do not have access to a research budget that enables the engagement of 'outside' participants.

The final possibility I would like to consider is the notion of this model being one of communication as well as research. I had this pointed out to me and I immediately saw the way the three levels were actually levels of communication: level one being intrapersonal communication; level two interpersonal communication; and level three 'mass' communication. As such the possibilities of this as a model for researching communication using communication are interesting. While there are applications of ethnography in the study of communication (Ellis, 2004; Carter & Presnell, 1994), Ellis (2004) discusses the early emergence of researcher self-awareness in communication

studies from the 1970's there does not seem to be introspective research that is clearly referred to as communication research. More importantly I ask the question, why do we not research communication through communicating? The scope to develop intersubjective communication research using my model is great.

### Limitations of the model

This model is only suitable for those researchers who are able and willing to enter into an introspective process, although willingness and ability often develops and increases as the research progresses. This is an approach that is hard work, emotionally demanding and where there are no certainties. I hope that this model and my recognition of the way it can be workable for those who find the research process difficult to enter into and complete (psychologically or practically) will actually address some of these issues. I hope that I have taken these difficulties to the extreme so that 'they don't have to'. In part this is what this research approach is about; not the question of 'what can I do as research?' but the question of 'what have I already done that could contribute to an academic field?'

A related limitation is that many of the practices discussed in chapters 5 and 6 rely on a certain level of ability to facilitate a group, work with others in a way which may present emotional challenges, a need for an understanding of the person centred approach and an understanding of creative approaches. I would recommend some form of training or research into working with others in this way. This is not a counselling situation but the impact of any revealed understanding on the co-researchers must be considered along with the

initiating researcher's ability to facilitate the group should interpersonal difficulties arise. I also feel that the process can be entered into without such formal counselling training if all co-researchers are aware of the personal nature of the encounter and accept a level of self-responsibility for this.

I have found that in groups co-researchers develop their own ideas about how we can research, for example describing our socks, writing down our wishes and fears and explaining our understanding of one another through describing each other as different animals! Any activities I have proposed are just this; an offer of an idea of something to do and all activities are entered into with the consent of all members. It is the job of the facilitator or initiating researcher to be aware of co-researchers who seem hesitant or concerned. I do think this is also a responsibility (and in my experience one which is taken up readily) of the rest of the group. If it is a truly co-operative venture all co-researchers will accept equal responsibility but the initiating researcher(s) will have to reflect on their own skills, abilities and training in questioning what activities they would like to involve to start the process and develop the required climate.

There are aspects of the research process that were not part of my aims for this research but which have informed my understanding and could be developed further in the future, for example I have observed roles in research group such as a 'silent' role where one member of the group does not say as much but seems to develop a greater understanding of the group and the research focus as evidenced in their reports. In furthering this study it would be interesting to work with some of these thoughts and also to consider the feasibility and appropriateness of some sort of training programme for research facilitators.



The benefit of the model representing three levels but allowing the research to evolve is that the research can be primarily situated in any level that seems most appropriate to the research, the researcher and the available resources. A researcher does not have to develop research groups in a formal way but might like to organise conversational meetings with colleagues or friends to talk about experiences and understanding. Personal growth will still take place if co-researchers are reflexive and person centred principles are kept in mind.

The final limitation I will address (although I recognise there could be more) is the absence of concrete steps to follow in applying this approach. This may lead to the question of ‘what do I do?’ While Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to a ‘bricolage’; the use of a variety of methods from elsewhere, I am suggesting the researcher just ‘trusts the process’ and follows the ideas that reflection on ‘how we know what we already know’ throws up. There is also a need to work in a way that is appropriate for the study, so a play therapist might research using play therapy, a team of practitioners might research using regular meetings, if the researcher finds writing a useful way of exploring this is a method they can use or it may be that they want to use painting, dance or conversational interviews.

Having said this, it is maybe not the approach for those who like to know what they are going to be doing and who feel more comfortable working within a structure (however, I can think of a number of co-researchers from the collaborative inquiry groups who were of this nature). The practices I have outlined in chapters 5 and 6 offer a way of researching that can be followed. Activities such as creative work, group interviewing through the hot-seat and storytelling are more than sufficient as ways of researching experience. As mentioned above, reflection may well help identify ways of developing

understanding that are appropriate for the particular researcher(s) and the particular project.

#### My own interests in developing the model

I hope to continue working with this model and I am a firm believer that research does not 'end' but that there is a point where we have to communicate some of our findings. I would like to develop my ideas about the emphasis on communication and begin to build this as part of my academic interest in interpersonal communication. I also feel an interesting next stage for the model would be to trial the way it could work to engage practitioners in research. I am interested in the idea of research facilitators taking the place of academic 'researchers' in researching experience and practice and how a training programme could be developed.

There is no doubt that I will continue researching; it is part of my way of being. It is almost as if once the reflexive processes starts it is difficult to turn it off. I was recently told by a man who trains police dog handlers that I was a natural dog handler when he came to assess my latest dog doing his kennel club obedience awards. I know this is not about an innate skill but about the fact that I am even reflexive, introspective and going through a cycle of personal development when training my dogs – now there's a research project I would enjoy!

## Chapter 10 – Final Reflection

I never thought I would reach this point. I never dared to believe I would reach this point. Perhaps that is why I avoided it, as if it would be too good to be true, as if *I* could really submit a piece of work for a PhD. But there I go cowering when I should be right up there in the roller coaster, laughing and grinning because it is time to get off. It is finally time to look back and say, ‘I’ve done it!’

Just two weeks before writing this I was telling my friends I didn’t think I could do it. One friend said to me, in an apt analogy given my motherhood study, ‘come on of course you can, think of it this way, when you are in labour the moment the midwife tells you to push is the moment you say you can’t do it; it is just when you think you can’t do it that you will do it’. Thanks for that, Wendy (her favourite pseudonym); I did do it!

I was full of doubts about the quality of my research and my ability to write it in a way that made it look like research. I was worried about what ‘people’ (those giants I talk of in the literature review) would think of it. Perhaps that remains to be seen. This has been a subjective study and so I will not ask what anyone else thinks yet, I will reflect on what I think.

I struggled with the way to form this document and even now I think about the way chapter 6, which is about the resulting model, was originally four chapters; one for each of the levels and one for the operation of the model as a whole and I think, ‘should it go back to being that way?’. I changed it because I wanted to explain the model as a whole, because my experience was that the levels were inseparable in

the way I had actually experienced the research process and I wanted to be clear about their interaction. In writing chapter 6, I began to see that as a level three process I had to separate out these levels in my explanation because level three is about making understanding transferable to the audience. I could carry on forever in that vein as the research is not going to end, it will carry on within me, in my future approaches to research and for anyone who cares to pick up this study and take something from it. I do, however, have to get off. This is my exit point.

I have been on an emotional journey, and as always happens in these situations I am full of cliché. I turned up at university in 1997 as someone who had failed their A-levels, dropped out of just about everything, but I was ready to learn. There are moments in life when you ‘be that self which one truly is’ (Rogers, 1961) and as I became a part of university life I became myself. I found the place where whatever it was I was good at, and before that point I was sure there was something, had a chance to shine.

Since then I have ‘become’ in so many ways. I have become a mother, a wife, and a ‘Mitchell-Smith’. I have developed as an academic; moving from my cowering in the corner to shouting my genius from the rooftops and I have settled somewhere in between with an acceptance it will never be finished, never be perfect and always be open to criticism or as I now like to think of it, collaboration. At the same time I have realised it is certainly not worthless and there is so much more I could add.

Yesterday I commented that I did not want to include acknowledgements and dedication until I knew it was going to ‘make it’, but the award of PhD becomes

irrelevant because I have still done the study, for me it has been informative, transformative and developmental.

Jeanette Winterson has titled her autobiography, 'Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal'. It is something her mother said to her when she said being in love with another woman made her happy. My Dad sent me this book. He was on holiday and had just read it. He rang me to ask if I had read it yet, 'oh it's fantastic, I'll send you a copy now' he said. By 2pm the next day it had arrived.

'Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit', the fictionalised version of this story, became a part of our household. It was one of the things we quoted. It was one of the ways we co-created meaning as a family. It is the title of the autobiography that says so much to me, 'why be happy, when you could be normal' because if there was a mantra being pushed when I was growing up it would have been the reverse, 'why be normal when you could be happy', illustrated by the fact that my Dad always called my sister 'the white sheep of the family'.

It is no surprise I took a less conventional route into my research; what else could have been expected of the daughter who has a father that drives an 1936 Austin Seven and dresses in a priest's cassock (he is not a priest) and an artistic mother who in character at times bears frightening resemblance to 'Edina' of the BBC comedy series, 'Absolutely Fabulous'.

I was always encouraged to be myself, and this is what I have done in my research. The focus on introspection, the engagement with other people and the reading and writing are all things that I love, things that make me who I am. So regardless of

any external questions about the quality of my research, I am sure it is an honest and true reflection of my experience. In this study I have explored my own experiences of the research process. I have uncovered the processes that enabled me to understand. I have explored the aspects of my life that have helped and hindered this process and I have concluded that they helped; I am all the better for understanding my work apnoea and my motherhood, and after all, the most important outcome is within persons.

I have had to allow the panic and allow the grief, I have had to do this one thing at the expense of the others – just once I needed to - but I am sorry, Oscar; I sent you out with the shoes that are too small because I didn't have time to find the right ones.

If you ask me what I do now I only know this. In juggling you never touch all the balls at once and as soon as one falls you drop all the others in trying to catch it. So if I have to choose something what will it be? Ask anyone what is more important, your work or your children? Few will say work, even if that is about honesty! So having put them all through it and having deprived myself of them in going through the final process of this research I feel for a just a little while I might just hold one ball – but hold it tight. After all they call me 'Doctor Mum' anyway – because I put plasters on their knees.

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# **Appendix 1**

## **The Personal Element in Collaborative Research**

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## **The Importance of the Personal Element in Collaborative Research**

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**ABSTRACT** This account draws on the experience of five final-year students of human communication and one tutor from the Manchester Metropolitan University who conducted collaborative research into life stages. The research was personally developmental for all those involved and resulted in an increased sense of personal power. The authors discuss the use of their personal development as a research tool, using the models of cooperative inquiry and heuristic inquiry. Ultimately, they consider how their 'therapeutic' process can be termed 'research', and how their approach can be utilised in research that is personally and socially educational.

### **Introduction**

We (the authors of this article being five final year students of human communication and tutor, Paul Wilkins) elected to inquire together into some aspect of human experience. Rather than being predetermined, the object of our inquiry emerged from our process. The focus became 'life stages' as a result of our conversations and time we spent together in our early meetings. We identified common experiences of passing through stages in our lives, both those we had been through and some we saw as being landmarks in the future. We paid particular attention to our present feelings about being in a time of transition from childhood to adulthood.

The focus was of importance to us all. This fact, coupled with our way of working together, facilitated personal growth. We became aware of the importance of our process and how growth enhanced our understanding. The process became as much a subject of our inquiry as the topic we had identified. We spent most of our time talking together and we realised that dialogue was our main way of learning more. Conversation also allowed us

to check we had understood one another. This resulted in a group understanding that formed the results of the study.

We worked in a way similar to an 'encounter group' (Rogers, 1970), a format with which we were familiar. As part of a larger group, our learning had included a variety of creative and expressive approaches, including artwork, storytelling and psychodrama. In our second year, we studied approaches to counselling, counselling skills and methods of human inquiry. This gave us background knowledge of counselling theory, and the theories of heuristic research and the collaborative paradigm. We were also introduced to the 'person-centred approach' practically through counselling skills exercises and the way in which Paul facilitated our learning. The person-centred approach became part of our way of being together. Empathy, acceptance and congruence (see Mearns & Thorne, 1999) became key components of our interaction with one another, even when we were not deliberate in the deployment of these skills.

The focus and content of this research were important to us, but as we worked together it became clear that aspects of our process were even more meaningful. We were struck not only by our corporate learning, but the individual benefit we gained from our research. Zinnia Mitchell-Williams has studied the reports of former students participating in similar inquiries. They also recount that the most important outcomes of their research include a development of self-understanding and a new approach to understanding others. The main focus of this report is on this 'personal' element. We explore the meaning and validity of 'growth' as both an outcome, and a tool for human inquiry. Our conversations were deep, honest and based on our own lives. Our investigation aided our development, and gave us knowledge and skills with which to manage a time of transition.

Our research was co-owned and, although the lead was taken by one student member of our group (Zinnia), we have all contributed to the preparation of this paper. It is a synthesis of our individual reports; these arose from our frequent group discussions and explorations. We write in our collective voice, but we also refer to our individual reports and extracts from these appear in italics.

### Our Approach to Research

Our overarching framework was cooperative experiential inquiry (Reason & Heron, 1986). This model is based on the philosophy that we can do research *with* and *for* people, rather than doing research *on* people. A group of people research together and decisions are made democratically throughout the study. During the research the group cycles through phases of action and reflection. Reason & Heron (1986, p. 458) identify three ways of knowing:

- propositional knowledge as expressed in statements and theories;
- experiential knowledge which is the knowledge of experiencing something;



- practical knowledge being the knowledge of how to do something.

Practical knowledge is seen as the fulfilment of the knowledge quest. Later a fourth way of knowing was added (Heron, 1996, p. 53): presentational knowledge, knowledge that can be shared with others. The group cycles through ways of knowing, returning to propositional knowledge, where theories are amended.

We used cooperative inquiry as a framework, rather than a concrete method. We were influenced by other approaches. Heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) with its emphasis on 'conversation' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47), intuition and creativity informed our method, and we also took a person-centred approach to research and interaction (see Wilkins & Mitchell-Williams, 2002). In our synthesis of these influences, we were seeking a systematic procedure that would lead us to understandings that we could symbolise and transmit, i.e. that fit definitions of research (McLeod, 1994, pp. 4-5), but which also had 'human' and 'democratic' dimensions. It was important that our research arose from our collective interests and 'needs'. We wished to research in such a way as to open ourselves to each other's experience as thinking, feeling, intuitive and imaginative beings, and in which we jointly made decisions about the nature and direction of our inquiries.

The person-centred approach characterised our way of relating to one another and, as such, was a methodological approach as much as the heuristic and cooperative models. Research that is person-centred is that where all involved are respected as equals, there is not one expert. Subjective experience is valued, and should be accepted and remain free from the imposition of the ideas and views of another person (i.e. the researcher). Rogers' (1957) core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence should be communicated in the research environment (see Wilkins & Mitchell-Williams, 2002).

Our guiding belief was that, in researching human experience, we should start with ourselves; we know more about ourselves than we do (or can) about others. Also, we can discover more about those with whom we converse directly, deeply, honestly and frequently than we can know about any 'research informant' we interview for an hour. In keeping with this philosophy, we decided that, to be able to conduct research according with the interests, needs and experiences of us all, we should deepen our understanding of ourselves and each other. Conversation, creative expression and simply 'being together' facilitated this learning and became a method we used throughout our inquiry.

The methods we incorporated have common principles. Principally, people are valued as experiencing agents, capable of understanding their own experience and informing others. Participants are termed 'co-researchers', hold equal power in decision-making, and co-own the research and its outcomes. Heuristic research in particular focuses on holistic understanding (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 10-14).

In research of this kind, a high level of self-understanding is required. This can be acquired through or enhanced by the research process. Co-researchers learn about themselves (and each other) through self-searching and disclosure. There is an inevitable focus on 'self' and interactions between group members (Wilkins & Mitchell-Williams, 2002). We find such research to be growth-promoting for all involved. Some of this growth results from intra- and inter-personal processes, but the research *per se* also contributes to development; there is a practical outcome. For example, our research aided us in a transition between 'life stages' (most of us were about to leave university and saw ourselves on the threshold of 'adulthood'), as well as furthering the development of our self-understanding. Wilkins (2000a, p. 20), adding to Heron's (1996, pp. 48-49) understanding of the aims of cooperative inquiry as informative and transformative, and drawing directly on our research conversations in this group, describes this as 'developmental inquiry'.

### The Research

In our investigation, we made a deliberate decision to draw exclusively on our own experiences and knowledge. To this end, we set out to explore significant events in our lives and what we knew of others. We checked our understanding of life stages with fictional and biographical literature to see if other people's representations matched our feelings. The literature also informed our understanding. The methods we used relied on person-centred principles in that we worked to create an open and accepting environment in which we felt safe to share our experiences. This environment also served to encourage disclosure and help us discover things about ourselves. We used methods from the arts therapies to enhance our exploration and communication (see below).

We immersed in our experiences, occasionally returning to propositional knowing, that is, acting and then reflecting. Our way of achieving understanding was to mutually transform ideas through conversing and thus to create shared meaning. That is, we preferred synthesis to analysis. As Gergen (quoted by Schwandt, 1999, p. 457) states, 'Understanding is not contained within me, or within you, but in that which we generate together in our form of relatedness.'

### *Prepropositional Knowing*

Most research begins with a question. Even cooperative inquiry usually begins with a predetermined area of research – and that is chosen by the initiator of the project. However, the focus of our inquiry evolved from our discussions about ourselves and our lives. We see this as an 'organic emergence' because a subject of mutual interest was allowed to surface through group interaction. Heron (1996, p. 9) argues that cooperative inquiry is characterised not only by 'democratisation of research content', but also by 'democratisation of method'. Although this is true, the



democratisation of content is usually *post hoc* – that is, after the 'initiator' of the research has determined the broad focus of inquiry. Allowing the focus of the research to emerge from group process and, thus, to be the product of the co-researchers makes the choice genuinely democratic.

Before we determined an area for inquiry, we spent our weekly sessions discussing what had been happening in our lives, the group and how we felt. We made some use of creative techniques in this process of exploration. During this time, when we appeared not to be 'researching', we formulated a focus for inquiry in keeping with the needs, knowledge, experience and interests of us all. Although everything we did together was important and contributed to this, a key incident exemplifies our process.

In our own time and beyond the terms of our original commitment, we took a day trip to nearby woods. We were all very excited. We thought our excitement was illustrative of our desire to be as children once more and we found ourselves drifting into a 'playful' way of being. We fashioned a 'den' from fallen branches and ferns, decorated it with found objects and huddled inside to read a fairy story. Our declared intention was simply to be together, consolidate as a group and to have fun. However, perhaps much more than this was happening. We see this as contributing to a process we came to call 'prepropositional knowing'.

Prepropositional knowing is a logical extension of the cooperative inquiry paradigm. Reason & Heron (1986, p. 458) identify three ways of knowing (experiential, practical and propositional) through which cooperative inquiry cycles. The cycle starts with a phase of propositional knowing, that is with some initial statements or questions, but how and from where do these propositions emerge? Paul (Wilkins, 2000a, p. 23) described our process thus:

The early stages of this group were characterised by structured, semi-structured and unstructured efforts at team-building. We spent time with each other, hearing each other's stories, sharing enterprises and endeavours ... From this process of simply being together, an issue of interest and concern to us all 'bubbled up' and we decided to concentrate our efforts on understanding life stages. With hindsight, we recognised the events leading up to our first statement of propositional knowledge as essential to the research process and to our evolution as a research community. It was at our second return to propositional knowledge that we attached to it the label 'pre-propositional knowing'.

It is evident that the conversations that revolved around our families, work outside and inside the university, partners, anxieties about the future and stories about the past, led us to focus on 'life stages'. Our interactions determined the way we researched and what we researched. We had no set structure, but rather followed the direction in which our growing understanding of each other and ourselves took us. It was this that enabled 'organic emergence'.

We identified our focus as 'life stages' during a coffee break. This was comparable to an 'illumination' (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 29-30) following a lengthy 'initial engagement', when we had collectively reached 'inward for tacit awareness and knowledge', and permitted our 'intuition to run freely' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). Although only three members of the group were present when the ideas were formulated, a lengthy process had led us to this illumination. Each of us contributed to the discovery of the topic. That it was a collaborative choice was confirmed by the reaction of our missing members ('Yes, that's it!') when they were told. We had reached our first phase of cooperative inquiry proper and were ready to 'formulate some basic propositions' (Reason & Heron, 1986, p. 459).

### Our Action ...

Our ways of consolidating as a functioning research group and exploring our chosen topic were various. We used a variety of creative and expressive techniques and also took deliberate steps to explore each other's experiences, beliefs and views.

### *Creative Expression*

Creative expression facilitates communication; it is also an agent of personal change. In a variety of ways, we used colour, shape and tone to manifest personal meaning. Our process was akin to the four stages of art therapy outlined by Silverstone (1993, pp. 131-132):

- the image manifests itself within the person;
- the person externalises the image through paint or clay;
- there is a dialogue with the therapist (or in this case other group members), so the meaning may become known on a conscious level;
- it may be necessary to work on the revealed meaning.

Art is a useful way of expressing things we can't explain through language – perhaps even to ourselves. Using images, the 'felt sense' of a phenomenon can be identified and worked with as a way of uncovering meaning. For example, during our period of prepropositional knowing, we explored our sense of the group by producing images that represented the collective. Our first activity, once we identified our topic, was to draw 'life maps'. We talked to each other about our drawings, discussing the significance we attributed (or did not attribute) to events. We used our life maps to make a preliminary definition of life stages and set ourselves some research questions.

### *The 'Hot-Seat' Interview*

Another way of inquiring we chose was a technique we called 'hot seating'. Each of us sat in the 'hot seat' to be questioned by the others. We could ask any question, but the 'interviewee' was not obliged to answer. However, any answer must be truthful. The importance of this was our collective



immersion in the interviewee's experience, absorbing it into our individual understanding and into the group understanding of life stages.

Our analysis of these interviews took the form of conversations. We discussed experiences we had in common or that were of particular interest. We made continual and repeated reference to what was said, and by whom. The 'data' remained constantly present in our discussions and in our returns to propositional knowing. We did not wish to fragment our experience, tease it apart for themes, because we thought this would result in a loss of information. We wished to avoid the experience of West (1997, p. 296) who reported 'In breaking down the data into relatively small units for coding, there arose some feeling in the researcher that some holistic totality was being lost, or at least hidden from sight.' We realise that this results from our election of a synthetic approach to understanding, rather than the more conventional route of analysis.

### *Storytelling and Dialogue*

An important element of our interaction was the telling of stories about our lives – indeed, 'storytelling' was our main investigative tool. Storytelling helps give meaning to our lives and our experiences (Atkinson, 1998, pp. 1, 12) and, for us, this worked in a variety of ways. As a member of a previous research group suggested, when one of us shared a story it triggered a story from another and so on. Often, on hearing a story, we remembered a forgotten experience. Stories provided inspiration, and offered fresh ideas or confirmed old ones. We also gained an understanding of another person's experience through their story, as it involved us in events from the frame of reference of the teller. Atkinson (1998, p. 12) suggests that, in telling a story, we increase our understanding and knowledge of ourselves, deepening the meaning in our lives through reflection and putting our experiences into a form that can be understood by others. Stories are part of our natural dialogue and interaction (see Wilkins, 2000b, p. 144). Wilkins (2000b, p. 147) frames the process of storytelling in research as having a number of stages. These are:

- The telling of an individual, highly personal story as a largely intra-psychic process.
- The mediation of the story through writing a journal, painting a picture, etc.
- The more public retelling of that story, where it is modified by the input and influence of others.
- The recasting of the personal stories in the light of the previous stages and pre-existing stories (which may include anecdotes or the literature) and the production of an encapsulating account. This account may take notice of or even be based on a variety of 'creative' output.
- The synthesis of a group story from the personal stories in such a way that all feel and believe 'that is our story – I see myself and my colleagues in it'.

In our research, ideas were shaped through interaction and conversation. For example, Wendy tells us what happened to her over the weekend; then Zinnia waffles about how it is connected to some seemingly unrelated issue from the previous week. Paul picks up on this and makes it a little clearer, then starts introducing other elements until he himself is lost. Meanwhile Karyn is jotting ideas down wildly; at least someone will remember what we've said! Becky protests that she doesn't see how all this relates and Meabh is giving us an argument as to how all our ideas are at fault. Within this chaos is a structure for creating meaning that relies on us all and all our individual qualities, as well as our unique way of interacting. We were filtering the story through our individual experience and through our developing understanding of the research focus. Within our disputes there was a deep respect for and understanding of another's point of view. Out of one short story comes a proposition. Something we have co-created, something we all understand and 'own', collectively and individually.

Our conversation also allowed the 'real world' into our research. It kept our focus on what was actually happening in our lives, to our friends and families, and the world as a whole. Sometimes the 'outside world' acted as devil's advocate as we introduced the reservations or questions outsiders had in response to our ideas.

### Our Reflections

#### *Returning to Propositional Knowledge*

In our first return to propositional knowledge, we defined six stages of responsibility characterising life progression. In so doing, we realised we had neglected our original research questions (these were largely concerned with life stages in the context of gender and culture) – it now seemed unnecessary to answer them. We were satisfied with our understanding of our own life stages. However, we felt the need to verify what we had found. Throughout the research, we conversed with people outside the group to widen our understanding. For example, in considering our stages of responsibility involving parenthood, we turned to a fellow student who was mother to two teenage children. We also consulted fictional and biographical literature, and found stories similar to those shared within the group.

The second return to propositional knowing was a reflection on the 'hot seat' interviews. From this, we determined a number of shared experiences, which largely reflected our ongoing transition from dependent 'children' to self-regulating adults. Our third return to propositional knowing was a 'fishbowl' presentation at a departmental research seminar. The audience was able to see how we worked by witnessing our interaction and the way we made decisions. Their feedback enabled us to put our research into a wider context. They alerted us to the limitations of our assumptions in that they were culture bound, principally by the fact that we were all white, British and educated to university level. They also commented on issues of power.



*Devil's Advocate Role*

Heron (1988, pp. 51-52) draws attention to the role of 'devil's advocate' in cooperative inquiry. This is a way of checking the process, the propositions and the research questions within the group. Each of us played the devil's advocate at some point, some more often than others. We noticed that each of us would point out different types of problems. For example, Karyn would remind us of our early statements and the implications of our research models, while Meabh often questioned our assumptions about human life and human nature. As our account of our third return to propositional knowing demonstrates, people outside the group also provided a useful devil's advocate function. Sometimes, our families and friends too disputed our propositions, and stories in the media caused us to reflect on and redefine them.

*The Issue of Power*

At our third return to propositional knowing, it was suggested by members of the audience that Paul, as an older male and tutor, held considerable 'institutional' power. Implicit in this observation was that youth defers to age, females to males and that agents of the university have instrumental power. It was asserted that we would be at the mercy of these encultured attitudes. However, this was not our subjective experience and, even when we look back on our research, we genuinely believe that our power dynamics were more complex than our critics allowed.

'Power' is not so clear-cut within the cooperative paradigm. We acknowledge Paul's responsibility for assessment and that he introduced the rest of us to the methods with which we worked. However, we freely elected to join the group fully aware of his philosophy and practice. We argue that the approaches we used are democratic, but that this democracy allows for the exercising of different personal qualities – indeed, it depends upon them.

As we were researching, in our various ways, we all had power and influence. Perhaps our contributions were not equal in forcefulness, but we maintain that they were equal in value. Southgate & Randell (1981, p. 53) in their discussion of dialogue in research, highlight the importance of 'mutual respect and understanding'. 'Mutuality' is also fundamental to person-centred philosophy (see Wilkins, 1999, pp. 71-72). These concepts encapsulate our relationship better than 'equality'. Implicit in our respect for each other, our ways of being and our modes of communication, is an acceptance that people contribute differently, whether by talking, listening, criticising or supporting. Power was important to us, but we sought to develop collaborative power, rather than to exercise authoritarian power.

Marshall (1984, pp. 107-108) argues that, as an alternative to the notion that 'power is competitive, a matter of individual ownership, motivated towards control and expressed through doing', 'power can be cooperative, based in joint ownership, directed towards influence and expressed in individuals' quality of being'. Natiello (1987, pp. 268-286)

discusses the importance of collaborative and personal power. Personal power refers to a person's independence and the ability to act under their own control, being integrated and aware of their own feelings, needs and values. Natiello sees that qualities of wisdom, experience, learning, age and exceptional vision, are not restricted to some members of society, but are present in all people. We shared this belief. Caring about each other's needs and a respect for individual abilities allows for collaborative power, which is characterised by openness, responsiveness, dignity, personal empowerment, alternating influence and cooperation, rather than competition. Our research gave us all a sense of empowerment – we experienced ourselves as discovering personal power through the development and exercising of collaborative power.

Differences between people will always affect the influence each person has in a group. Awareness of these influences not only reduces the unseen 'taint' in the research, but also allows for a consideration of 'power' in terms of the research focus. For example, Paul's position in terms of professional authority was not hidden, but very much an aspect of our research. In addition, we drew attention to and questioned the differences in gender, but embraced Paul's experience as an older male. Equally, he valued our experiences as young women, clear that what we shared was as educating for him as his stories were for us.

#### *Our Results, the Process Leading to Them and How They are Useful*

To illustrate the way we worked together we include a sample of our findings and how we arrived at these propositions.

As our first return to propositional knowledge we gave a definition of life stages. We intended to work to this and check it through the course of the research. The definition read as follows:

Life stages are significant points in the past, present, or future which occur because of biological, emotional or cultural processes but of which we have an individual experience. These events tend to occur in the same order (but possibly at different times) for most people. Men and women have different experiences but nevertheless they go through equivalent stages.

We arrived at this definition as a result of our life maps and the hot seat interviews. The life maps illustrated our conception of life stages and significant points in the past, present and future. Stages we all showed clearly on our life maps were those such as marriage, having children, birth and death. From the hot seat interviews, we noticed some other significant similarities in our experiences. For example, starting school was a memorable occasion for all of us and represented a time of change in our lives. Learning to drive gave a feeling of new freedom. We also all talked about our first experiences of getting drunk, which for most of us was in the local park. These are all cultural stages in that attending school, drinking, and learning to drive are all rites of passage that are part of a western



culture. In telling our stories one member of the group talked about how she was going through a rebellious stage at that time. The rest of us had talked about how this had happened to us earlier in our lives. This led us to propose that stages may occur at different times for different people.

We discussed biological stages in terms of those stages that were inevitable, like those we saw in our life maps, birth and death, and ageing including puberty. Our inclusion of emotional stages came as a result of people discussing things such as who they felt emotional attachments with, who they felt emotionally dependent on and how this changed as they grew up, for example, feeling less dependent on family and more dependent on friends. Emotional stages relate to the stages of responsibility outlined below.

Our use of conversation meant that the research did not follow a predetermined course, but was led by what was important in our lives at that time. Leading up to Christmas someone asked what we were all doing over the Christmas break. We began to discuss Christmas traditions, we all had some kind of Christmas ritual that we felt had to be performed. These rituals were extremely important to us and the more we discussed them the more we realised that we needed these rituals as a yearly affirmation that although things change there are some things in our lives that are constant and that we can rely on.

We began to talk about how we felt the need for consistency in life even though we progressed through different stages. At the time most of us were at a stage in our lives where we were leaving the parental home to begin independent lives. The feeling of being kicked out of the nest was the basis for many of our conversations. For example, one of the members of the group complained about her bedroom at 'home' being converted into a bathroom. We all called our parents houses 'home', even though we did not live there, one member of the group had never lived in the house they called home. We all expressed a desire to be independent, but we wanted to feel we could return to the parental home and find things the same as they had always been. We decided that life stages overlap. We need to hold on to parts of the last stage as we move forward. Most of us were finding that we needed to hold on to elements of childhood and being looked after, to moving into being adults and being responsible for ourselves.

Our conversations began to centre around the idea of responsibility. After many discussions, we drafted a list of stages of responsibility. This represented a return to propositional knowledge. The stages were defined as follows:

- your parents are responsible for you;
- you are responsible for yourself;
- on having children you become responsible for them;
- as your parents age you become responsible for them and the extended family;
- you return to being responsible for yourself (children having flown the nest and parents passed away);
- in old age somebody else (e.g. your children) becomes responsible for you.

The first two stages came from our discussions about moving from being our parents' responsibility to being responsible for ourselves. We also talked about how we were beginning to worry about our parents, for example, about their financial situation. Paul, being older, was already responsible for himself. He talked one day about how he felt he was becoming the head of the extended family. He felt he was becoming responsible for making sure his father was alright and that he was now in charge of making family arrangements and making the regular telephone calls. Previously, his father had taken this role. This led us to discussing the stage at which you become responsible for your parents.

From the three stages of responsibility (1, 2 and 4) we had identified though our conversations, we began to build up the other stages of responsibility as we understood them as a group. We acknowledge that these stages are not universal. They represent how a group of individuals perceived life stages and responsibility. Friends and family, as well as the audience of our presentation questioned the stages we suggested, for example, pointing out that they had not become responsible for their parents, but their children were raised and independent. We decided an extra stage of being responsible for yourself might be usual between being responsible for your children and being responsible for your parents. We also recognised that the stages we outlined related to our own culture; for example, children in different countries and cultures may become financially responsible for the extended family at a younger age.

To check how our understanding of life stages related to other people's we consulted fictional literature such as Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* and biographical works, for example, *Moab is my Washpot* (Stephen Fry) and *Many Years From Now* (Paul McCartney). We found similar experiences represented, for example, Stephen Fry's account of the first day at school. We also saw how experiences could differ, for example, Paul McCartney talked about how he missed out on stages of growing up through being famous at a young age. This made us consider how different circumstances affect life stages.

Our discussions would often include and be motivated by references to the media. Everything from *Ally McBeal* to news stories relating to life stages informed the research. There was a story in the news about men who lived at home with their mothers into their thirties and this sparked a discussion about how life stages may have changed over the centuries. Documentaries also played a part giving an insight into other people's lives. We talked about the *7up* series, broadcast from 1964, as this showed people's development from childhood through to adulthood including their changing aspirations and expectations of what life may hold for them.

We interacted with other people's stories represented in the media and in literature through our discussions. They became part of our understanding. It is important to note that, as such, we understood them from our own frame of reference and the process of checking our propositions did not offer an objective evaluation of our findings, but added more fuel to a subjective fire of conversational analysis.



As we discussed our experiences and developed our understanding we benefited personally. As individuals we learnt more about ourselves and the meaning we attributed to our experiences. This promoted a feeling of growth. Exploring life stages together allowed us to see similarities in our experiences and our feelings about them. In discussing Christmas rituals we became aware of our need for something to remain constant in our lives. Understanding this need and the fact that it was a need felt by other people was comforting, even though we realised change was inevitable. Making future projections, however idealistic or unrealistic they may be, gave us a sense of direction at a time when we were unsure about the future.

Although our findings may not provide any universally relevant conclusions about life stages research such as ours can be used in learning how people understand experience. Our findings show how a group of people see life stages as relevant to their lives. There was a practical outcome from our research in that we learnt to deal with a transitional stage in our lives. Our learning is not something that is only relevant to one particular area of our lives, but is something we will continue to use and develop. We have found new skills principally how to understand ourselves and those around us, which will hopefully benefit both our work and social interactions thus helping others practically.

#### *Outcomes and Experiences of Growth*

The importance of the personal element in our research is demonstrated by the following quotes from group members:

The great benefit and particular hallmark of the collaborative approach is that it places significant emphasis on a personal encounter with individual experience and dialogue with the actual persons. Therefore, in every sense, the approach calls for an intimate working, sharing and growth. At its very heart it is and has to be entirely personal and personal-experience focused. (Wendy)

[The research] has enabled me to grow as a person and understand 'who I am' (I feel that this point is perhaps the most significant outcome of the research). (Karyn)

Much we have discussed, presented to others and reported individually has been related to this personal element in collaborative research. This leads to personal growth and a deep involvement with the research *per se*. Our findings with respect to this and of personal growth as an outcome are presented here, and illustrated by statements of individual co-researchers.

- Growth is facilitated by the climate within the group:

Gaining this level of awareness of who I am was mainly influenced by the climate of the group in which I was a member.

Being asked to contribute my views and beliefs made me understand that my membership was just as important as everybody else. (Karyn)

- Personal growth benefits not only individuals. As we grow within the group, we share our new understandings and help each other in the process of discovery:

There is a sense that in our knowing and discovery of ourselves we are able to let go or allow part of that as a contribution to the group process. It is the willingness of the group to be honest and open that allows that facilitates and enables the alchemy of change to take place. (Wendy)

- The way the research evolved allowed the topic to be relevant for all the co-researchers. In effect, the focus evolved out of our personal growth as we interacted in the early stages:

The research offered us the opportunity to voice fears, hopes and aspirations about life and the stages which it entailed. It was to become clear during the presentation, through the feedback of those who encountered the group, that the research was a safe means of each individual voicing their hopes, fears and aspirations. (Meabh)

- The malleability of our research gave us freedom in exploring our lives. The importance of our thoughts and experiences, both collectively and individually, gave a feeling of empowerment:

The inquiry allowed us to change direction if needed rather than constraining us to pre-determined experimental design. By being able to do this we were able to pursue the issues which became apparent through the research ... Collaborative inquiry seemed to allow the group freedom, personal control and above all empowerment both in terms of personal growth and academic understanding. (Rebecca)

- Our deep involvement with our focus became entwined with the process of inquiry. As well as researching life stages, we were inquiring into the research process:

We became involved in our own experiences of the techniques, sharing our thoughts and feelings about them, about ourselves and each other. (Rebecca)

- The research is not only 'informative', but also a representation of how knowledge and understanding may be acquired:

It offers an insight as to how a group of people gain knowledge and understanding from one another, which is then related to the area of life stages. (Meabh)

## Discussion

### *What Makes it Research?*

We engaged in a systematic process of critical inquiry leading to a number of propositions. This fits McLeod's (1994, p. 4) definition of research. Our research was personally transformative. It could be said to have been 'therapeutic', although a practising psychotherapist, PP, argues that there is a difference between personal growth and therapy, and insists that our process corresponded to the former. What matters most here is that our personal transformations were the by-product of our research, not its purpose. Furthermore, we see this 'growth' as integral to the research process and enriching of it. Although we gained practical knowledge of 'how to' deal with life stages, we take the view that this 'personal growth' was an important outcome of our inquiry. This raises significant questions.

Our research was meaningful to us and has transformed the way we approach our lives. We now know more about life stages, ourselves and ourselves in relationship, but what, if anything, have we to offer the wider research community and students of human nature? We accept that the outcomes of our research, the final propositions, are specific to our group. This does not mean that they are without interest to others, but we are not offering 'generalisable' truths. Is it such truths alone that make research useful? We think not (for, in seeking to broaden an understanding of the human condition, 'specific' accounts are of great value), but here we wish to draw attention to the benefits of our philosophies and methods, rather than to our findings.

Our discussions allowed us to explore personal understanding, interact with our co-researchers, verify what we heard, and transform our stories and experiences into shared meaning. The group climate and our creative activities encouraged us to discover and disclose more about ourselves, which enriched this shared, co-constructed meaning. Is this research? We take the view that it is. As well as a developing propositional knowledge, an outcome of our inquiry was a holistic, embodied understanding of the process of change in our lives and, as a result, we dealt with some of our anxieties and garnered some coping skills; that is, there was a practical outcome. Heron (1996, p. 38) indicates that such effects are indicative of 'transformative' inquiries and, as such, are legitimate objectives for collaborative research. The personal growth we also attribute to our research fits PP's description of developmental cooperative inquiry and Heron (1996, p. 38) cites 'transformation of personhood, personal growth skills, interpersonal and transpersonal skills' as among the aims of transformative cooperative inquiry.



### *The Importance of the 'Personal' Element*

The personal element in collaborative research allows for all involved to be engaged, focused and personally rewarded. As all contributions are seen as valuable, accepted as being 'true' for the co-researcher and inform the group's understanding, the co-researchers feel empowered. The energy of collaborative power allows for a creativeness and openness that increases tacit understanding.

Our experience suggests that, in the course of an inquiry, co-researchers feel increasingly able to look at themselves and share what they see with others. If what they find is something of which they were not previously aware, then 'personal growth' is deepening the research and offering a level of understanding that is not obtainable without it. We suggest that personal growth is thus a valuable research tool in its own right and an outcome that informs our understanding of human beings. We learn about ourselves and inform others of what we find – this is an effective way of understanding human experience. In explaining what we understand, we see what is shared or common to us. Learning from this process is not something that can be confined to the shelves of a library, but something we carry within ourselves, something we share with others and something that informs the rest of our lives.

### *Our Approach*

'Human inquirers' who are seeking to understand attributed meaning and subjective experience could benefit from adopting our approach. What stood out for us in this research was the value of conversation as a research tool. Conversation allowed the 'data' to be 'analysed' as it was presented. The data was the analysis and the analysis was the data. The research was like a rolling snowball, growing and developing as time passed.

We do not claim our approach as being of universal applicability. Our practices are not suitable for all people or all projects, but we do offer it as an inspiration. Others may benefit from our knowledge of the value of conversation, self-searching and organic emergence as ways of enriching the research process and so incorporate similar processes to deepen their research. Our research methods show how human inquirers can borrow methods from person-centred philosophy, counselling and psychotherapy. O'Hara (1986, pp. 172-184) argues that person-centred therapy is heuristic inquiry. She states (p. 174) 'Client-centered therapy is, itself, a heuristic investigation into the nature and meaning of human experience'. As a corollary, we offer the thought that any research which is deeply personal will facilitate personal growth.

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# **Appendix 2**

## **Reflection on ‘Belonging’**

## **Reflection on Belonging**

Inspired by Moustakas' (1961) study, 'Loneliness', this research represents the opposing yet inseparable component of what Moustakas refers to as an "organic whole" (1961:103). Six co-researchers were chosen by myself as people who feature significantly in my own experience of belonging. The study was conducted using the framework of heuristic research (as outlined by Moustakas, 1990) and components of co-operative inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986). The findings showed that in the experience of the co-researchers, belonging is characterised by a place where one is wanted, comfortable, accepted, understood, respected and valued. There are many groups to which we belong that contribute to a feeling of belonging and self-worth. The second, but equally important element of this research is the Relationship between the method and the subject. Belonging became interwoven into the study, as it is interwoven into our

**lives.**

Abstract for my undergraduate dissertation, *belonging* as it appeared May 2000.

I researched the experience of ‘belonging’ for my undergraduate dissertation using a group of close friends as co-researchers. I mainly followed the heuristic method but incorporated a co-operative element in having a group discussion before individual interviews and in treating the findings as the result of a group effort. We were a group that had naturally formed through friendship so we had a sense of belonging together. Therefore the study was rooted in real life experienced, we were researching whilst experiencing, and the research was informing our real lives as well as vice versa.

As the research progressed the method became entwined with the subject of belonging, the two seemed inseparable, they ‘belonged’ so I began to see the energy and depth a

subjective approach could bring to research. I also saw that method couldn’t always be followed or recorded in the straight-forward ‘cake recipe’ manner I was told was necessary for research reports.

As I saw this research as the root of my interest in methodology it was essential for me to return to belonging in reflecting on my developing ideas about research. I

studied my own undergraduate dissertation before beginning to reflect on other people's for the second time. It was interesting personally to see the difference in my life now to what it was then, the difference in my sense of belonging, and I was rather stunned by how many of the ideas I see as a result of my PhD research were present in my undergraduate study – had I not progressed in my understanding?

The first thing to strike me when reading the document again was how I had decided to research belonging. I had been inspired to research belonging when reading *Loneliness*

(Moustakas, 1969). When reading the book I was aware of the fact that I didn't feel lonely, I felt I belonged and so decided to research the experience of belonging. So this choice tells as much about me as anything that ended up as 'findings', it is one of the most important elements of the research. The understanding of belonging that I started out with was a synthesis of different influences around me such as the way belonging was portrayed in films and on soap operas. I was obviously informed by my own experiences such as the sense of belonging I felt at funerals and football matches. I have since noted the importance of the interest a researcher has in researching a certain topic, primarily through reading undergraduate dissertations and discussing with researchers their reasons for choosing the subject of their research. This seems to me to be an extremely important element of research, as I have mentioned it gives a huge insight into the researcher and the grounding for their research. The choice of a topic for research has become a key part of my model for inquiry, namely the theory of 'organic emergence'.



In reading *Belonging* there was certainly a personal process for me that involved evaluating the way my life has changed; principally how my feelings of belonging have changed. When I first researched belonging I was 21 years of age, in my final year at university and part of a large group of friends who I spent all my time with, who were as important to me as my family. I am now 26 years of age – not much older but I am married, I have a son and suddenly my extended family have replaced my friends as the people I spend time with. I still see the *belonging* co-researchers, some of them very often but with one thing and another some of them have become distant friends who I see at events rather than people who are my whole life. So reading belonging makes me sad, it makes me think of a time that is gone, but it also makes me think of how I belong now. When I got over the sadness and the urge to ring all my friends and ask them to run away with me so we could always be together I realised I still belong, just in a different place. I belong with my husband and my son, we are a family (did I say husband and son, I mean husband, son, dog, horse, rat, fish...). In creating my own family I have an element of belonging that I didn't have before.

So with all the changes in my life and in my feelings of belonging does this mean the findings of the original study were wrong? Of all the things I noticed about the study the thing that struck me was how the way belonging was represented still rang true.

# **Appendix 3**

**The Theory and Experience of Person**

**Centred Research**

# <sup>15, 2 (2002) (2002)</sup> The Theory and Experience of Person-Centred Research

## INTRODUCTION

<sup>2001</sup>  
<sup>my</sup> This paper arises from the thought and experience of a group of people working together to conduct research in a person-centred way. Although there are only two authors, we draw heavily on the experience and thought of our collaborators and we wish to publicly acknowledge their contribution. One of us (PW) has been working with student groups for some years now with the intent of developing an approach to research which is rooted in his person-centred philosophy and which is genuinely 'participant-centred'. ZM-W was a member of the collaborative research group which met in the academic year 1999/2000. As well as contributing to the theoretical sections of the paper, hers is the principal voice of practical experience.

## THE PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Wood (1996, p. 163) characterised the person-centred approach as 'a psychological posture, a way of being, from which one confronts a situation'. It follows that this psychological posture may be adopted when investigating phenomena; that is, it is possible to be person-centred as a researcher. By definition, such an approach to research values the subjective experience of the participants and depends for its effectiveness upon the communication of Rogers' (1957, p. 96) necessary and sufficient conditions. It involves a willingness of the initiator(s) of the research to share power with everybody else involved and to engage with them, the research question and findings as a whole and present person. That is, the research is not 'led' by any one individual but all are co-researchers. The effectiveness and validity of a person-centred approach to research depends upon the expression of the actualising tendencies of the co-researchers.

There is little research which conforms fully to person-centred principles and yet there is a deeply-felt need on the part of some people committed to the approach to employ its values in researching. For example, Wolter-Gustafson (1990, pp. 221-22) writes:

I needed a method that would involve my whole being, including intellect, intuition, feelings, and spirit. To honor and reclaim as strengths my emotions, sensitivity, and creativity was to claim my wholeness as a researcher.

She concludes that person-centred theory and practice offers strategies to enable this. Similarly,

Hutterer (1990, pp. 60–1) writes:

To be engaged in authentic science means that investigators are involved as subjective human beings, committed to their values and intrinsically motivated to investigate a specific area of interest. Authentic science involves subjects as respected partners in the research process, incorporating their interests and interpretations as a part of the investigatory process.

Rogers (in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990, p. 270) records his belief: that the human organism, when operating freely and nondefensively, is perhaps the best scientific tool in existence, and is able to sense a pattern long before it can consciously formulate one.

When people approach phenomena with minimal reference to previous knowledge and preconceptions, are willing to consider any seemingly relevant data, however small, and trust their total sensing (for example, instinct and intuition as well as cognition) then they are most likely to discover significant meaning. Rogers also stated (*ibid.*, p. 274) that 'the more nearly the individual comes to being a fully functioning person, the more trustworthy he is as a discoverer of truth.'

It is the active demonstration of the core conditions which promotes 'free and nondefensive' behaviour in co-researchers. Just as the ability of person-centred therapists to be accepting of their clients while remaining authentic is dependent on their ability to be self-accepting, so the ability of the person-centred researcher is similarly restricted. Part of person-centred research therefore must be attention to the personal development of each co-researcher and to the process of the group as a whole, otherwise the research may be limited. Marshall (1986, pp. 194–5) has pointed out some of the dangers of developing defensive attitudes and how they may be avoided:

Research can be a wonderful way of not finding out, of avoiding central issues — by erecting a facade of academic theory, for example, I can become estranged from my concerns and deal with them as if they are purely aspects of the outside world.

Embracing the personal nature of research means I live through each project, balancing my engagement with others with attention to my own processes, always with the aim of using my involvement creatively.

However, the validity of person-centred research does not depend upon its participants being 'fully functioning'. What is important is that they freely enter into the research, that they are motivated (that is, it has purpose, relevance and meaning for all concerned) and they are encouraged and supported in it by person-centred attitudes.

There are strong links between new paradigm methods which seek to co-operatively explore human experience and person-centred therapy. Such methods include heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) and co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1984). For example, Barrineau and Bozarth (1989, pp. 465–6) consider that 'qualitative researchers may benefit from developing and fostering the attitudinal qualities Rogers postulated to be necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change.' These conditions and (*ibid.* p. 468) the 'atmosphere of open inquiry' which is fundamental to the person-centred approach are appropriate to heuristic research. In their comparison of heuristic inquiry and the person-centred approach, they argue that the difference between therapy and heuristic research is slight: both promote growth. This echoes the view of O'Hara (1986, pp. 172–84)



who argues that person-centred therapy *is* heuristic inquiry. She states (p. 174) 'Client-centered therapy is, itself, a heuristic investigation into the nature and meaning of human experience.'

Mearns and McLeod (1984, p. 372) offer five key characteristics of a person-centred approach to research which 'when taken as a whole, define a distinctive and powerful perspective on the research act'. Similarly, Barrineau and Bozarth (1989, pp. 472–3) characterise person-centred research as requiring that the researcher holds particular attitudes: these are essentially those required of a person-centred therapist.

### The characteristics of person-centred research

Drawing on our own experience, the previous models of person-centred research and related methodologies, we propose that person-centred research has the following characteristics. It is:

#### *Phenomenological*

It is based in the subjective experience of all those involved. The focus is on the wholeness of experience and meaning is discerned from that, not from measurement or abstraction. Becker (1992, pp. 10–11) emphasises that 'experience is a valid and fruitful source of knowledge.' This requires an openness to the experience of others. Intuition, emotional reactions, sensations and flights of fancy are to be listened to with as much respect and regard as 'rational' thought.

#### *Empowering*

The 'subjects' of research are also co-researchers and contribute equally to the discovery and construction of meaning. This process empowers all co-researchers because value is placed on each individual's wealth of experience and opinion. We use the term 'co-researchers' to include all members, including the facilitator or initiator of the research, to reflect the equal importance of each member. The product is co-owned and the responsibility for the research is shared. When talking about 'power' with respect to person-centred research, we do not mean power in an authoritarian sense, but rather personal or collaborative power. Natiello (1990) discusses the characteristics and implementation of both personal and collaborative power (see below).

#### *Permissive and elective*

Participation is by invitation and (except in the most extraordinary circumstances) anyone volunteering with understanding of the process and the commitment involved is likely to be able to offer something of relevance. This is different from research conducted with 'informed consent' in that the potential co-researchers are proactive. To rule anyone in or out complicates the process of getting as wide a spectrum of experience as possible. Co-researchers are encouraged to contribute to the research in personally meaningful ways. It is a role of the research community to support each other in these efforts.

#### *Inclusive*

Person-centred research seeks to include the views and experiences of all involved (co-researchers make a deliberate effort to lay aside their frames of reference when considering the contributions of others — see Mearns and McLeod, 1984, pp. 376–7) but it is inclusive in other ways. Co-researchers participate in the data processing and formulation of conclusions

and contribute to the presentation of the research. Reason (1988, p. 38) writes 'Presumably co-operative inquiry leads to co-operative reporting, and the writing of any report should be a shared business.' This is true for person-centred research, the results of which are always co-owned. Who actually undertakes the task of writing is less important than that every participant agrees that the final report reflects their experience. It is the tendency to mutuality and the open and continual sharing about the process of research which is conducive to the production of jointly owned findings.

*Involves empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence*

This is axiomatic — it is fundamental to person-centred research that empathy, acceptance and congruence are encouraged and promoted throughout. When co-researchers experience themselves to be deeply understood and accepted by authentic co-researchers, however naive, wild or silly they may fear their views to be, they are likely to be encouraged further in their explorations and so to offer more of the totality of their experience. This considerably enriches the 'data'.

*A 'real world' approach*

Person-centred research is not concerned with the control of variables — it deals with actual situations, complex inter-relationships and commonplace reality. Becker (1992, p. 11) states that 'our everyday worlds are valuable sources of knowledge'. Person-centred research is inductive and synthetic. It attempts to achieve an understanding of individual and collective reality.

## POWER AND THE PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH TO RESEARCH

In any human inquiry, power is an issue. Much of PW's concern in developing person-centred research strategies has centred on how to 'democratise' the research process. This is especially a problem if the research is conceived and implemented by one person — that is if there is a 'researcher' and several co-researchers.

Mearns and Thorne (1988, p. 127) argue that, as the person-centred therapeutic relationship develops, so there is a developing reciprocal trust between counsellor and client. This leads to the development of 'mutuality', which is a central process in the person-centred relationship. Mutuality is highly desirable in person-centred research and it is a particular strength of the approach that it is likely to lead to the development of trust. Whereas the therapeutic relationship clearly has potential advantages for the client, if research is initiated by someone who will directly profit from its successful completion but other research participants will not, this may militate against the development of a committed community of collaborative researchers.

As well as inequality with respect to who profits most directly, there are other power imbalances of various kinds. For example, 'researchers' have 'power' in as much as they, consciously or unconsciously, have a major influence over the direction of the research and who participates in it; but they are dependent upon the active co-operation of the other participants who, through their action or inaction, have the 'power' to determine whether or not the research proceeds to completion. Marshall (1986, p. 196) writes of the importance of 'engagement with people' as part of the research process stating:



I seek a measure of equality and wish to be non-alienating in relationships. This involves telling participants what the project is about; discussing its aims and uncertainties; at times revealing where I stand and what I find puzzling and contradictory about the issues raised; and allowing participants to shape the research direction. Whilst as the researcher, I have a different stake in the project from others, I expect to meet other people's needs as well as my own.

That the researcher, while having definite and apparent personal needs of the research, will be open to and have the expectation of meeting the needs of others is an essential element in the equalising of power in person-centred research.

Marshall (1984, pp. 107–8) argues that there are four dimensions to power and that, as an alternative to the notion that 'power is competitive, a matter of individual ownership, motivated towards control and expressed through doing', 'power can be co-operative, based in joint ownership, directed towards influence and expressed in individuals' quality of being.' She (*ibid.* p. 110) defines co-operative power as originating 'in a wide attunement to the interests of the . . . community.'

Natiello (1990, p. 272) states 'the concept of collaborative power is inherent in the theory of the person-centered approach'. Collaborative power is at the very heart of person-centred research and it is essential that an atmosphere conducive to its development is promoted. 'Personal power', defined by Natiello (1987, p. 210) as:

the ability to act effectively under one's own volition rather than under external control. It is a state wherein the individual is aware of and can act upon his or her own feelings, needs, and values rather than looking to others for direction.

Power which Marshall (1984, p. 231) sees as conferring flexibility and choice, is also important both because empowerment is an aim of the process and because co-researchers who sense their personal power are more likely to contribute to the fullest. In the core conditions, there is a powerful tool with which to promote an atmosphere of collaboration and an increasing sense of personal power (see Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990, p. 182).

What evidence is there for all this? Drawing on PW's work as a collaborative researcher, feedback suggests at least some success. For example, co-researchers commenting on PW's role (see Wilkins et al., 1999, p. 12) say:

Ultimately Paul's inductive naturalistic and flexible style of facilitation meant we were all responsible for the content and direction of the group and though this was at first disconcerting, it became very empowering. The sense of shared responsibility was very important in terms of taking away a sense of strengthened self.

and:

In the end, when facilitation moved away from Paul to other group members, it appeared to me as if his role of 'expert' had been replaced by his role as 'equal'.

## PERSON-CENTRED RESEARCH IN ACTION

In this section, we explain something of our actual experience as person-centred researchers. Six undergraduate students (including ZM-W) and PW (as facilitator or convenor) met

weekly for six months to conduct a 'human inquiry'. Because it represents the voice of the group, the rest of this section is written in the first person plural.

As members of this research group, we were free to determine the focus of this inquiry and our way of working together. It was never suggested that we must approach the research in a person-centred manner (although PW did mention this as one of several possibilities). Chiefly, we drew on the co-operative experiential inquiry method of Reason and Heron (1986) and we were influenced by ideas from heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). We were also deeply affected by the person-centred philosophy of PW, but how we were together became much more important than any theoretical understanding. Although it was unspoken, we recognise that our research was person-centred and our mutual history and our personal and group needs led us inevitably to our way of working. We think that our experience contributes to an understanding of what it means to be a person-centred researcher and offers a basis from which others may develop their own approaches.

Our chosen methodologies implicitly involved person-centred values in our way of working. These included an openness towards one another, attempting to understand things from the other person's frame of reference, accepting the views and experiences of others and also being honest in our communication with one another. These things we knew were important to us from the outset and we could just as well have declared that we were going to work in a person-centred way. For whatever reason, we soon all become 'person-centred' in our approach to understanding and interacting with each other. In a way, we were already well grounded in the approach because PW had introduced the rest of us to its values, both explicitly in (for example) his teaching of a counselling skills course the previous year and implicitly through his application of person-centred philosophy to his teaching. Perhaps we were so deeply imbued with these values we took them for granted.

Our topic came about as a result of collaborative choice. In the early part of the research, we got to know each other and to understand what was important in each person's life, sharing the important events and feelings of the week with one another. Our discussions led directly (although not quickly!) to the topic of 'life stages', which we studied by sharing stories, anxieties and future projections about our lives. As we were open with one another, listening to ourselves and others, there was an organic flow into this subject. Somehow something directly relevant to our lives emerged (most of us were about to leave university and saw ourselves as on the verge of change). This process of reaching a mutual decision about the focus of the research we came to call 'pre-propositional knowing' because, when working in a consensual way, it is a necessary precursor to 'propositional knowing' (see Reason and Heron, 1984, p. 458). In this respect our research was person-centred because it was designed by all participants to meet the needs of us all. We continued to work together in a variety of ways, becoming so committed to our process that we voluntarily put in more time and effort than was required of us. We refined our interests, answered our questions and formulated others. We were attentive to one another, argued, celebrated, got stuck, were inspired (severally and together) and sometimes indulged ourselves (for example, by sneaking out of college to a coffee shop just before Christmas — although our conversation soon became centred on 'Christmases Past, Present and Future' which, of course, was directly relevant). We did come up with 'findings' but in many ways this was a less important part of our process. Towards the end of our time together, we presented our research as a departmental research seminar — a most unusual step for undergraduates. Rather than make a formal



presentation of our methods and interim findings, we chose to give an active demonstration of our way of being together as a research group. This presentation itself became part of the research.

Each of us tells how important this research was in terms of our development. For example, one wrote:

*Heron (1996, p. 100) compares co-operative inquiry to renaissance art in that outcomes are a combination of a way of being present in the world, the propositions that articulate it, and the practices that transform it. This is the way that I would see the outcome of this research, as a way of being, and a way of conceptualising life stages to enable us to transform through these stages . . . It feels like we have made the blueprints of our lives together and we have aided each other in developing the skills we need to cope.*

and another:

*(the research) has enabled me to grow as a person and understand 'who I am' (I feel that this point is perhaps the most significant outcome of the research).*

On one level, this was a straightforward 'informative' exploration — we were seeking to discover and understand patterns in the lives of people in the communities to which we belonged, drawing on our own experience, the experience of others to whom we had access, the literature (fiction, biography and academic), etc. But there was a deeper meaning to this research. Why should a group of people, most with relatively little experience of life and its stages, be so interested in these patterns? It was clearly linked to what most of us saw as an imminent (and perhaps radical) change in our own lives. The investigation had a subsidiary (and at first unexpressed) aim of helping group members through this change. By understanding life stages in general, we would be better equipped to understand and deal with the changes which were happening to us.

We do not think that any one of us would claim to be 'fully functioning' and that alone may be seen as limiting our potential to discover 'truth'. However, we did grow to trust each other and our collective wisdom. One of us recorded what she believed to be the 'good points' of the research. These were:

1. *There was a great level of respect for all the group members as personal thoughts and feelings were shared.*
  2. *The group didn't seem competitive in any way.*
  3. *The level of trust in the group was high due to sensitive issues being discussed.*
  4. *The group worked extremely well on the research issues.*
  5. *We all seemed to have a good time.*
  6. *People were honest about life experiences and personal thoughts on certain matters.*
- Also the group was able to confront each group member freely.*

These comments are about the climate we engendered and in which we worked. Her negative points dealt with a different, less personal quality, for example 'there was only one male in the group'. Others too state that an important element of this research was 'the way in which we worked'. One described our way of working in the form of a poem which begins:

We sit in companionable silence  
Waiting for the first voice  
The strands of our uniqueness  
Stretching out like tentacles  
To discover new truths.

In sharing we discover new truth between us  
But in our silence we discover the truth within  
Each moment of silence is a form of growth  
But the growth is fed by our struggling words  
Words of questioning  
Words of encouragement  
Words of wisdom  
Or just words starting on their own journey  
And we each discover the truth within ourselves.

In terms of person-centred theory, it is the active demonstration of Rogers' conditions which promotes 'free and nondefensive' behaviour in the co-researchers. Sceptics may assume that, as the experienced person-centred practitioner, PW had a major role to play in this. Although a typical comment is 'Paul's style of facilitation gave all the members a sense of responsibility and confidence in directing the research', what strikes us most is that in the reports of our process, we pay much more attention to how we collectively did this for each other. For example, one records that even in our disputes there was 'a deep respect and understanding of the other person's point of view'; another, discussing the importance of 'authentic collaboration'; writes 'all members of the group were very supportive and accepting of what everybody had to say'; and a third states 'our faith in each other's opinions, feelings and intuition . . . has developed through the time we have spent together and through the natural development of person-centred characteristics'.

Person-centred research, then, offers much more than 'information'. The experience can bring great personal benefit to all co-researchers. As in our case, the focus of the energy of the researchers may become so attuned to the process that the subject of the research becomes secondary in importance. Although we do not believe that 'person-centred research is therapy' is a necessary corollary of O'Hara's (1986, p. 174) view that person-centred therapy is heuristic inquiry, we do find that it is inevitably growth-promoting. Whatever its subject, it is difficult to see how person-centred research can exclude a focus on 'self' and the interactions between co-researchers because its nature invites people to be themselves, and share that self with others. This, together with the provision of a climate in which the actualising tendency is fostered, leads inexorably to personal development.

Heron (1996, p. 48) described co-operative inquiry as being either transformative or informative — that is, either exploring practice within some domain of experience and being transformative of it, or being descriptive of some domain and informative or explanatory about it. Person-centred research can be either, or (like co-operative inquiry) can combine these approaches, but it has another dimension in that it can change the participants. In our study of life changes, we found that our research aided us in making the transition from one way of being to another. This and an awareness of other ways in which we had changed, led

us to an understanding that research can also be 'developmental'.

In feedback from groups such as ours, members talk about the importance of learning more about themselves, being able to take the time for that focus, and how learning about the self then aids sharing that new understanding with others. The research group becomes a community where each person is developing their understanding of self and others. In essence it is the process of becoming 'fully functioning' through which we all become more comfortable with ourselves and gain an insight into the way we, ourselves, approach the world.

Person-centred research leads to an understanding of the self through reclaiming the strengths, emotions, sensitivity and creativity that Wolter-Gustafson (1990, p. 222) sees as necessary to her 'wholeness as a researcher. Participants are facilitated towards becoming 'whole' as a person, allowing inhibitions to fall away. For us, it was almost like returning to childhood — a state in which we truly sensed our 'selves' and were able to express what we felt. Such expression offers infinite richness to the research. When the people involved in a research project are encouraged to discover more about themselves as they share their views with others, the research can only benefit. It becomes richer both in its informative or academic outcome and in its 'developmental' outcome. In our experience, for the co-researchers it is the process of researching themselves, sharing their findings through which something of incredible depth, interest and validity can be added to the understanding of human life, the human mind and human behaviour. This is at once intensely personal and of great value in that respect, but it also offers something to the sum total of knowledge of the human condition.

## APPROPRIATENESS OF PERSON-CENTRED RESEARCH

A person-centred approach is most appropriate where the aim is to achieve a deep understanding of the experience of research participants. It is a way of comprehending *personal* meaning and of transforming this to achieve a consensus understanding. It is most fitting when the basic questions are 'How?' or 'What?' rather than 'Why?' For this reason, it is unlikely to be appropriate when some measure of 'effectiveness' is required. Mearns and McLeod (1984, p. 384) point out that:

The person-centred approach fulfils the requirements of research that involves, or may lead to, a *developmental* aspect. The open-ended nature of person-centred investigations increases the likelihood that new perspectives will be identified that can be assimilated into the developmental process.

Person-centred research depends for its success upon the commitment of the participants to *encounter*. This means that attention must be paid not only to the research process but to the relationships between participants (hence the importance of the core conditions). This is demanding but, as Mearns and McLeod (p. 384) state, 'it is also offset by the fact that this personal commitment tends to be reciprocated'. It is from the wellspring of encounter that person-centred research draws its strength. If the intending co-researcher finds the process of encounter difficult, or for some other reason foresees that this level of personal commitment is unlikely, then a person-centred approach to research may be unsuitable.

Because person-centred research is collaborative and because it seeks to explore the frames of reference of the participants, it is impossible to dictate its course or even the manner in



which it is conducted. Mearns and McLeod (1984, p. 385) write:

As one avenue is explored, others open up. The researcher, with due regard to his proposal, must make choices as to which should be explored during this 'unpredictable journey'.

Such choices are made by the research community as a whole. It is unlikely to serve if there is an intention to move towards a definite endpoint or if there is a particular question which *must* be answered.

Person-centred research is appropriate when, for example, the aim is to reach an understanding of process in therapy, what clients value or the experiences of therapists. It is equally appropriate to working towards an understanding of consciousness, for exploring social needs or in reaching some assessment of educational strategies. It will never lead to an 'objective' understanding but it is singularly effective if the intention is to find out what people really think, feel and/or sense in any given situation. It also has a role to play when change is a potential objective, whether this is developmental change or a transformation of the type which may be sought through participatory action research. Undoubtedly it has other applications. All it needs is the inspiration, dedication and determination of the co-researchers.

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# **Appendix 4**

## **Notes on Undergraduate Dissertations**

~~creative synthesis doesn't do justice...~~

The real creative synthesis is the way in which we communicate, belonging is represented whenever we are together by the way we are.

vid 4 - OK but we should realise this if we weren't researching it

So again what makes it research is realisation, reflection & representation

'The human is of research'

### Realisation

recognition of parts of our lives, elements of our behaviour, our feelings & emotions

Also making our understanding as 'real' as possible not in terms of truth or objectivity but so it is alive, a lived experience is: we really feel it - even if it is a second hand 'story' experience (someone else's story)

- 1 level 1 experience - direct experience
- level 2 experiencing - experience of conversation, interaction with 1st person experience
- level 3 experiencing - experiencing without direct contact with the 1st level experience so reading or something where you cannot check your understanding

~~Collective Research~~

Demonstrates natural interest  
aids research. Her research is about  
'Happiness' but she talks a lot about  
relying on instinct to lead her to texts.  
I suppose this keeps the literature  
in line with the researchers spirit.

Finding similarities in diverse texts  
eg Buddhist and academic.

Collection of ideas - is this something  
we do to understand?

Idea of themes & need to check experience  
against numbers of people.



In all the undergraduate dissertations students seem to cling on to the necessity of making explicit gender, socio-economic status and culture / ethnicity. Why is this? This implies a degree of difference between the way those people experience a phenomena. In my eyes, when doing heuristic / subjective / creative / collaborative / person centred research the experiencing agent will mention sex / gender / class / culture if they think it is relevant to the experience. Why put it in if it is not mentioned again! not relevant!



(on influence of others).

"It was not the collaborative element of Storytelling that I was after, but more the opportunity to physically voice my stories and ideas to aid my own intrapersonal communication, thus furthering my own personal growth".

- So she uses collaborative experience to inform individual inquiry and I use <sup>see</sup> individual process as informing collaborative inquiry

level 2  
as data for  
level 1 inquiry

level 1  
as data  
for level 2  
inquiry.

Ch 9

Bullying - better more feelings than actual  
bully.

A.C.  
SPENCES (1996). The fatal flaw: A narrative  
of the fragile body-self. Qualitative  
Inquiry 2(4), 463-494.  
N Wall 2000

"I... attempt to take you as the reader  
into the intimacies of my world. I hope  
to do this in such a way that you are  
stimulated to reflect upon your own  
life in relation to mine" p. 467.

"I am not sure I want to reveal the  
complete 'truth' because for me the  
experience is in the uncovering"  
- as if this should be the process for  
someone encountering the research.

Ed B 2000: 737

"Her story inspires thoughts about myself.  
How would I feel if I had a breast removed?"

p. 742.

"Readers, too, take a more active role as  
they are invited into the author's world,  
evoked to a feeling level about the events  
being described, and stimulated to use what  
they learn there to reflect on, understand,

I am left, not with a feeling of understanding bullying, but with a feeling of understanding the researcher and her feelings about herself and her experiences. There seems to be a lot about her experiences of being dyslexic and how others (teachers etc) treat her because of it. The personal stuff on bullying seems to be in a way justifying her experience, saying it has made her stronger, am I wrong in thinking she is covering up, putting a mask on something that is still painful?

A lot of her questions in her interviews and discussions centre around why a bully would bully rather than what the experience of being bullied is. This tells me just as much about the experience of bullying, I am left with a sense of her questioning their motives, why would they do this to me? And also justifying her position as a stronger individual – they are insecure, jealous, victims themselves. Not that I disagree with this notion but she does not discuss her interest in their motives or why she (seems to) want to see them as inferior, or the real victims – these aren't the right words but as near as I can get!

So is it a problem that I am understanding something different to what the title suggests? Not really, in terms of the fact that I have been informed in some way, learnt something more about the experience of bullying, something I didn't know much about, but if the researcher had been more honest about her feelings and justifications, been more focused on herself and the process of her learning it would have enhanced my understanding of her, and my understanding of the experience of bullying. She includes her experience as if she is trying to include it, squeeze it in

to match with the theory rather than starting with what she wants to explore personally (eg dyslexia stuff).

Although talking about method perhaps the most important she says about being bullied is,

“Although I sometimes may not be able to put my finger on what part of the behaviour was bullying; I simply know that it was”. So if she had to work backwards to understand the experience why does the document not read like this? I am thinking a) should we decide the focus at the end of the study and b) should we re-structure the way we write up research. Another element of this research that led me to think about point b) is the way parts of the introduction read like findings eg “bullies thrive on others’ discomfort and insecurities” this is an example of thinking and processing, is it a finding or should the researcher work backwards from this assumption to discover why she thinks this? This goes back to my earlier thoughts about how we should structure research documents to – this is what I think, this is how I got there rather than the method followed by findings.

“It is only through observation and breaking down the knowledge one has gained that gives someone the ability to understand what has been learnt”

“I suppose the very beginning of my research could have begun even before my teens, which may not have been in any type of order or structure with sophisticated theories, however the experience very much existed”

**Experience as data. Sophisticated theories? Experiential knowledge inferior to academic/scientific? Or just reflection on fact that that understanding hadn't been processed as research?**

"I found the most important one [method] that moustakas highlights, is the internal search... this must be recorded on paper in order for others to see the process"

**How did she record it? If the internal search is the most important method then it is very important for the reader/audience (level three) to see this process.**

"This research simply brought my life experiences of bullying together from the subconscious to the conscious part of my mind"

"ready for scrutiny, to facilitate understanding"

"It was clearer looking in to the process as opposed to looking out of the process, which was going on within myself. However I found that I was now divided from the experience of bullying, despite the fact that I was also looking at my own experiences".

**Interesting idea – is this subjective objectivity as opposed to R&R objective subjectivity?**

# **Appendix 5**

## **Examples of My Writing Process**

### **5.1 Researching Research and Living Life**

### **5.2 Take my Word for it – I'll tell it how it is**

## 5.1 – Researching Research and Living Life

My research started before it began. I realise this on reflection but it is an idea that fits with the research ‘model’ I have developed. I can look back on my experience of human inquiry and my development as a researcher and there are obvious beginnings to the way I began to think about researching the human condition in the work I did as an undergraduate. From an early group research project I enjoyed the research process and the idea of listening to people’s stories to learn about human experience.

My individual undergraduate dissertation and my involvement in a co-operative inquiry group were the roots of my use of heuristic research and collaborative approaches. Even further back, in the first year of my degree, I was introduced to what I called ‘touchy feely’ work which was a kind of getting to know you introduction to the interpersonal strand of ‘human communication’ I had chosen. These approaches that take ideas from various forms of therapy (art therapy, psychodrama, encounter groups etc.) have become an important part of how I research and how I understand the research process, as well as being important tools for research in terms of my model.

These early stages of my involvement with research have been the roots of my PhD research and so I see my research as having started there before I actually embarked on the study and indeed before I realised I was researching research. Actually I can’t draw the line at the start of my undergraduate degree course. When I think



about the origins of my research I think more about who I am than what I have done.

My father has one o-level in woodwork. He was not an academic child, he is a musician. He is, however, well read and most of all he likes biographies. He has always had an interest in people's quirks, the day to day living of people's lives and why they are the way they are. My dad has always been fascinated by people and talked about characters he has come across or read about and I think this lead to my interest in people and the 'everydayness' of life.

My first serious boyfriend used to call me an 'emotional lunatic', referring to my very sentimental nature. I was always nostalgic and always relived my experiences through talking about them and especially writing about them. I was also equally interested in and affected by other people's stories. Crying at something on the telly is something I am renowned for even when, perhaps especially when, it is fictional. Soap operas and even

'The Simpsons' have had me crying into tea towels. Even I have to laugh when I think of it, but it is this engagement with experience and emotion that really is the root of why I am interested in the research I am interested in.

I suppose I always wanted to understand other people's experiences, which is why I was drawn to social science. The interpersonal work I did once studying led me to realise I also wanted to understand my own experiences and the way I process them. I felt excited when

I learnt that research didn't have to be questionnaires and didn't need to involve trying to get strangers to do something they didn't want to do. I was instantly fascinated by the idea that we could use our own feelings a method of inquiry as in heuristic research. I was also drawn to the way Moustakas used stories and creative expression as this fitted with how I understood emotion and experience.

I can't remember the day I started the introduction to strand bit of my course which was so influential but I can remember wearing beige stretchy trousers and I had a green pager that clipped on around my waist. When I think of my first year at uni I think of wearing those beige trousers and clipping on my pager, which was then quite a good bit of technology to have. Now I think about it I had the pager because my sister was due to give birth and I was on standby, ready to be of use in some way. ##### always says that he remembers me in a long dark coat but I think I got that later into the term. I am sure I was wearing those trousers.

We started with getting to know you exercises like standing in corners of the room according to eye colour, number of sibling, star sign etc. to establish similarities and differences in the group. We moved on to using drawing and painting, psychodrama (I missed that session and I still regret it), and the now very familiar hot-seat technique. At the start of introduction to strand it all sounded a bit touchy feely to me and actually I had wanted to do the culture strand but I am so disorganised I hadn't claimed my place in time and it filled up. It's funny how things work out and the fact that they often do makes me even less pro-active and more go-with-the-flow because I presume fate will guide me. So I was miss

sceptical but immediately enjoyed it and then started to feel it was working. I don't know what it was working to achieve but something was happening. The group became close, we developed a feeling of trust and honesty – we were person centred in our interaction with one another and it felt natural rather than forced.

The group dynamic was further developed when we did a short course in counselling skills. Now we were using a person centred approach in a practical and intentional way, this contributed to our relationship. We did a group research project and I have this memory of sitting in a room in the communication suite with my research group; ###, #### and ##### and we couldn't do any work we were too busy singing, *"How do you do what you do to me, I wish I knew, coz if I knew what you did to me I would do it to you"*. This like the beige trousers somehow seems an important part of my development as a researcher. Perhaps this is because it these moments were about my development as a person. These moments represented changes in how I felt about myself. The beige trousers were what I wore at the start of the degree when I was a bit of a fish out of water, not lacking confidence but not really feeling like university was about making friends. My friendship group was based outside of university and they weren't the type of people you'd find in education! By the time I was singing with my research group I had pockets of different friends (and lovers if I'm honest) all over the place and so my confidence was at a high and I felt like myself for the first time since being a child... I suppose that is what was working.

On entering level three of the degree I had more choice in my studies. I had a dissertation to write and electives to choose. I chose to work with ##### in the elective that sounded most like touchy feely stuff – it sounded like research but I had realised by this point that that might not be so bad. Yes having been repelled by the idea of sharing feelings at level one but having enjoyed and benefited from the experience I now chose the most touchy feely thing I could find. For my dissertation I started with one idea but didn't really have enthusiasm for it, then when I talked to ##### about reading Moustakas' *Loneliness* I said I wish I had written it, "Me too" he said. I went away thinking about *Loneliness* and thought about how as I was reading it I was thinking about how I wasn't lonely but felt the opposite sense to that described by Moustakas. When Moustakas talked about feeling lonely in a crowd I thought about how I felt a sense of belonging even when alone and this is how I came up with the subject of *belonging*.

I researched belonging by researching *with* those I felt I belonged to; a specific group of friends. This was the start of my experimenting with my own way of doing research. I thought it made sense to research belonging with those I belonged with which was an extreme move from the idea I had started with; that research had to be done on strangers because of the idea that even qualitative research needed to be objective. I added a cooperative element in that all co-researchers met as a group to discuss feelings of belonging before I held individual conversational interviews. After completing my dissertation the one regret I was left with was that I did not include my co-researchers more in the research process specifically with regards to the individual depictions I wrote about their experiences and the creative synthesis

which I created by myself. At the time I felt I was asking enough of my co-researchers in getting them to take part in the interviews but later when I discussed it with them they all said they would have been more than happy to take their part in the research further. I would have liked to have them write their own individual depictions as a result of our discussions (well I suppose at the time I thought a collaborative depiction but now I think their own individual depiction) and I felt the creative synthesis could have been a co-operative effort or something they could have responded to in their own way.

At the same time as doing my dissertation I was part of the collaborative research group. We were doing co-operative inquiry with the influence of heuristic research (I think my dissertation research was the other way round). From the start I was excited about the idea of working in a group and when I think back to my attitude before starting university I hadn't liked group work. I was still a bit apprehensive about research and I was not completely sure about what co-operative inquiry would entail other than remembering something about cycles of research from the #####'s teaching the year before. I was drawn to the group because of my experience of introduction to strand and my new thirst for both personal growth and learning about others in a way that felt deep, meaningful and very 'real'. I think my expectations about what would happen in the group were much the same as other members in that it seemed we were all more aware about and interested in the way that we would work together rather than what we would actually do.

We were a mixed bag as I suppose most groups are. There was ##### who had obvious differences to the rest of us being the tutor of the group but by this time it really felt like he was one of us because of the work we had done in previous years. ##### was organised which was lucky because somebody needed to be and I was completely the opposite. ##### and ##### were both like little girls but in different ways and not in terms of intelligence or ability but in a needing to be looked after sort of way. #####, for one, had a feeling I was old beyond my years but I have always felt like that little girl who needs looking after. ##### to me was the one that seemed older and wiser and we had ##### at the start who seemed sulky and sometimes uninterested but was actually quite the opposite.

I have now moved to Macclesfield and the other day I took the dog for a walk at Alderley Edge which is not far from where I live. Very accidentally I stumbled across the area of the wood where we had built a den out of sticks and leaves on a day out we had decided to take. As I was walking through the woods I realised it was the same time of year and I smiled as I remembered this day where we had reverted to childhood – well ##### had seemed like a father, or rather a captain because he was wearing his captains hat. We had decided we wanted a day out and had chosen a day that wasn't our usual day for meeting up so we did not lose our regular time together. We were very playful and after recognised this desire to return to childhood. Not all of us went because of a bit of confusion and yet I can't remember which members of the group were there and which were not.

At the time of our day out we still hadn't decided on a topic to research. We had spent our sessions with one another simply talking and getting to know one another, which although we did know each other it seems an important step to get to know one another within a specific group, or get to know the group, form an identity or feel in some way. We had talked about our bedrooms being turned into 'spare rooms' and bathrooms when we had left the family home and there was regret and a feeling of insecurity in this. We didn't want to live at home anymore but we wanted our parent's homes to be there if we needed to go back. It was after I had finished my degree but when my parents sold our family home my mum chose a home without any spare rooms so, as she said and I quote, "You and your sister can't move back if you ever decide to leave your blokes". There was a feeling of being cast out of the nest before we were ready in our research group and alongside this we had other discussions, I remember ##### talking about how he felt he was the head of the family who had to keep in touch with everyone rather than it being his father's role and this felt like a change for him. While we were on a break a few of us were drinking coffee and somehow we came up with the idea that life stages might be the topic to research. When we met back with the others there was a unanimous belief that this was what we had been researching all along. Because of this process where we came up with the topic after we had started our research together we talked about how we had come to this decision. I suggested the subject had emerged and it was as if we were actually researching something before we actually knew we were researching it, "like a sort of prepropositional knowing" said ##### and there was born the idea that is still one of the areas of research I am most interested in.

Our research into life stages was based mainly on conversation even when, as with the hot seat interviews we imposed some structure on our process of inquiry. It was when I was writing one of the assignments for this elective, and it was always easy to forget that it was a university elective with assignments to complete, that I realised our way of analysing information was the filtering of our stories through telling them, listening to them and understanding them. Later I began to consider how this process could be used as a method for research. As I wrote about this research for my assignment and later the published paper and as I spent more time engaging with research I began see this process as and call it ‘transformation of meaning’.

Our ‘findings’ were communicated by means of a presentation within the university department. This was a fishbowl exercise where, rather than planning what we were going to say we discussed our findings as much between ourselves as with the audience. This made the our presentation of findings interactive and learning was mutual in that the audience ‘taught’ us as much through the questions they asked as we taught them about our research through what we said and how we responded to their questions.

After I had actually finished my degree I once again presented the story of our research at the faculty conference with #####. Here one comment and question stuck with me, “That sounds like a very nice thing to do for an afternoon, but what makes it research?” This became the burning question for me and as the funding became available for an MPhil/PhD this was the question I worked with. The process of



somebody else thinking about, and trying to understand our research contributed to my understanding to such an extent that it became the title, and the focus for my study.

As I began my research I was interested in creative, collaborative and introspective approaches to research because these had engaged my interest and my questions were, what makes them research and what do these approaches have in common? As I began my research what came out when I did some 'colouring in' was not a synthesis of such approaches or a vision of their similarities but a model that showed, for me, how these approaches had worked to develop understanding in the research I had been a part of.

I have developed an answer my question about what makes it research and I have developed a model that represents my understanding of research process in a way that can be used as a reflective inquiry.

Before I had even secured funding for my postgraduate research I became a part of another collaborative research group. I remember feeling nervous about joining a group of people who were now in the final year of their degree but I was excited about starting the research process all over again and I suppose it was about the interaction I was excited about rather than the idea of research – engaging with others and learning about them – which I suppose is research and I think I was excited to see what I might discover in terms of research approach as the life stages project had been so illuminating in terms of our method of inquiry.

The group felt difficult at first in a way and I think there was a big difference in that the life stages group had consisted of people who had been working together for three years whereas this new group, for a start had me as a member and in addition there were two members from other areas of the course who had not worked with ##### or the other group members before. As we began there were differences in our assumptions about the way we would work and noticeable differences in the language we used to describe the same processes – or are they the same processes it seems that if the name we give the process is different there is somehow a different meaning to it. For example what we called ‘stories’ someone else would talk about as ‘narrative’ and where we would think about our understanding of the story in an empathic sense other members would be more interested in discourse or social identities represented in the story. Anyway the differences were there.

Despite our differences we all had a desire to work with one another and see what may come of it. ##### and I explained what had happened the year before with the emergence of a theme and the other members seemed keen to go ahead and just see what happened – or I think they were, did me and ##### and I would expect ##### and #####, just hear what we wanted to? With the differences in the group and the fact that most of us didn’t know each other at all the idea of a time where we got to know one another was more important. We did this but I think our everyday conversations sparked some frustration at the idea we were going nowhere. I also wonder whether we were getting to know one another in the right way. It was more

like people becoming acquainted than trying to form a real understanding of one another on a deeper research level.

There were issues within the group arising from my being in the group when I had already finished my degree and also resulting from a comment a member of the group made that somebody else saw as racist. I think the effect this had on the group was a feeling of being judged and not being able to speak freely and it was actually the person who had brought to light these concerns that ended up sharing the most, or I feel quite a lot with the group to which we did not fully respond.

Although I believe these issues should have been worked out to a certain extent I also feel that this group did complete meaningful research and bonded as a group. It is funny that our ending point of our research was kind of to agree to disagree about our findings and this I suppose is the way our relationship became as well.

We researched connections which is a topic we all kept pulling away from but then returning to. Our main focus throughout was looking at how we understood connections differently and much of this centred on looking for definition for the term 'connections'. This led us into exploring different types of connection that were ties, bonds and relationships. Our problem was that we couldn't agree, some of us saw connections as spiritual, transpersonal feelings and some saw them as being about relationships, even negative relationships. We discussed whether you could be connected to nature, the world, and even yourself. While everyone seemed to think that we did not reach a conclusion or consensus about connections when I look back at our work (drawings, writings etc.) I see that we may not have agreed

that our personal understandings and experiences of connections were the same but we did reach a group understanding, a mutual understanding about how each other experienced the various forms of connection we had discussed. This made me, and still makes me think about the idea of a ‘result’ or ‘finding’ from research. I see this group understanding as the – and I still don’t have a word for the result it is not final, it is like a crescendo, it is not a finding it is the developed understanding that has resulted from the inquiry. I see this group understanding of connections as valuable, personally developmental and significant to ‘the’ understanding of human experience.

I am trying to think what was going on in my life at this time. ##### says he thinks I left my then fiancé, as a result, to some extent of the connections research. This is true to an extent, probably a fairly large extent I remember never once considering that I had a connection with him and of my strongest connections with people had been men who I had relationships with and it made me remember that you can find someone who ‘gets’ you and that I missed that. ##### said to me when I got together with my now husband, “you were always looking for another #####” and he was absolutely right. ##### had been one of those people I had a connection with and I met him while I was with ##### who was fully aware of this strange infatuation we developed with one another. ##### had understood me on that level where from the moment we met we didn’t need to speak to know what the other was thinking, a soul mate I suppose. I had also started to think about #####, the one who called me an emotional lunatic because for all the faults in our relationship (mainly because of the intensity and because we were only sixteen) we were one in the same person

and the connections research highlighted the lack of this feeling of oneness with #####.

So somewhere between connections and the next research project I left ### and got together with #####, now my husband. There was a connection, there was a feeling we would be together for life and he was nice to me. The whole process affected my work and I remember ##### coming into the deli where I worked and asking if I wanted to take some time off and I often think back and wonder whether I should have done that. It wasn't emotional stress that affected my work it was the fact that ##### was a student so I reverted to lying in bed all day and doing the bare minimum of anything I could get away with.

I started doing some teaching which helped me in making me realise that maybe I did actually know a few things. I suppose I had and still have this idea that I kind of bluffed my way through everything and somebody might realise at any moment. My ability to do my research is dependent on my ability to do everything else and as soon as I am not brilliant at something I just give up on everything and my inability to work has a lot to do with guilt about what I haven't done. It is strange how this makes me seem like a perfectionist, which I am far from but I suppose I do not like to show weakness, ask for help, or admit to failure. I am stubborn.

So amidst lots of changes in my life we did another collaborative research venture. This was the least successful group I have been a part of and writing this now I recognise my own disengagement with the whole thing and wonder to what extent I

played my part in creating a stagnant feeling within the group. Were any of us wholly present in the group?

There was me and ##### as usual and members of the interpersonal strand joined this time by two friends from another strand of the degree. Again I think the presence of these

‘outsiders’ affected the mood in the group. This does not mean it is the fault of those

‘others’, in fact quite the opposite. I think that in this group and possibly the group before there was an assumption that these additional members would and should work in the person centred way the interpersonal strand had become accustomed to. Certainly in this group the two members from another strand – ##### and ##### caused frustration with the rest of us because of the way they acted within the group. They would talk about things and giggle all the time and it is interesting that while other groups thrived on everyday stories about our lives this group didn’t seem to want to hear them from these two particular members. It felt different, like they were filling in silent space rather than sharing something they wanted us to hear. I am not sure that we addressed this with them and I don’t feel we moved into a space where we could create a climate for sharing and growth and therefore where we could engage with one another in a way that created developed understanding as research.

There were other issues in the group like another member didn’t really want to do any activities such as drawing and I wonder now what she had expected or wanted

from the group – perhaps if I had asked we could have moved on. As I said earlier I now wonder whether there was some negativity we were all bringing to the group, some kind of resistance to engage. Having said all this I am not willing to say that something is not worthwhile or important in developing understanding. I think that this group was the one that highlighted to me the importance of acceptance and also the importance of being open and honest and addressing issues that affect the climate of the group. So really is it all related to being person centred? Does the climate for therapeutic personality change also work for developing understanding in research? I think it does and the idea of growth is central to this.

I am thinking about this group and thinking about what our subject was or could have been. I have always thought about this group as being about acceptance and prejudice. Thinking about it now I remember a lot about being accepted by or belonging to a group that is not our own – sort of. ##### and ##### were not of our group to start with and ##### talked about being adopted. She was the main person to actually share her personal stories in the end. She talked about how she was ‘chosen’ and how loved she was and how she belonged with her family. #####’s family had just adopted a Romanian girl and she talked about her being part of the family. ##### was in a relationship with a Muslim man and was going to meet his family – she was anxious about being accepted by them. My life had changed considerably and so I found myself seeking acceptance and forming new groups. These were the conversations I remember and I can’t impose a theme on our research without the other members of the group but this is what stands out for me

and so that was how the research developed my understanding and that was the theme of the research for me.

In terms of a time scale I always think of my research according to collaborative research groups. I actually don't know how the rest of it fits in, both with regards my life and the rest of my research. In addition to the groups there has been an on and off literature search which is not the same as the conventional idea of looking for references but more an immersion in other people's research and ideas. What I learn through reading becomes a part of my understanding – everything influences me and is, therefore a part of my research like 'data'. Even more important to me is the conversations I have whether it be a catch up with ##### or a discussion with another research, or even a moan with a friend. The most significant thing for me about these conversations is the way it makes me feel energised about my research. There are two ways I start to understand myself what I am doing and what I have done and that is through talking about and writing about my research. So it is in the communication, the level three process, the representation, explication, presentation phase of the research that things become clear? No I don't think they become clear, this is often the hardest part and I have a sense of my knowledge or understanding beforehand which is hard to tie down. I suppose communication doesn't necessarily make things clear for the listener but refines my understanding of the subject. I just feel there is so more to research than final presentation of findings can convey. This is it I suppose the presentation of ideas is just another start to the cycle in that it makes me think again taking on the thoughts of the other person and having processed my ideas through their thinking.



The last group I was a part of was probably the one I was most nervous about because the year before hadn't worked so well and also because I worried about my presence being accepted. I was theoretically taking the lead with this group rather than ##### although I don't know that it happened like that, mind you there isn't really a lead to be taken beyond the first couple of sessions.

This turned out to be a successful group both in terms of the research and the group relationship – of course because the two go hand in hand. We researched relating and as with connections there was some resistance but we couldn't escape from the topic. We had one member from another strand of the course but she was quiet so she fitted right in – they're ok as long as they don't say anything or try to assert too much influence!

Even though there was the usual uncertainty at the beginning when we were going through the pre-propositional not knowing what we are doing stage, there seemed to be a commitment from all of us to engage with one another, to trust the process, and use our development as a group as the starting point for our research. We didn't know what to do one week and we talked about our socks – it was amazing how much information, or understanding, came from describing the socks we were wearing and why we put them on that morning.

This group actually came up with a finished 'product' of the research in the form of a poem constructed collaboratively from our individual feelings about the research

and the process – was it about relating or our group? Actually our process and the subject were one in the same thing because we were ‘relating’ and it was this phenomenon we were interested in. Although there was a collaborative communication of the understanding we developed I still have the feeling that it does not fully represent my feelings and understanding resulting from the research. I accept that you cannot share the whole of your thinking but I hope for an output that helps the reader develop their own thinking and understanding through fully engaging with our experience. I think I always come back to this idea that by telling the story of how you came to understand or feel about something the reader/ listener is taken through their own process of considering their own thoughts.

By the end of this research project I was pregnant with Oscar although I didn’t know it. It almost feels like that was a conclusion to my involvement with the research groups. Life got in the way and stopped that phase of the research and I always saw this as a negative thing but now I write it I am not so sure. I don’t mean having Oscar was a negative thing but just the timing of it. I spend hours with my friend ##### during which we spend most of our time talking about how wonderful we are for having children young – well we are not exactly young we were both twenty five when we had our first babies but by today’s trends we are young. We talk about how it is better to put having children before having a career – I suppose we like to justify ourselves because of our friends who do go out and earn money and also have the same social life we all had at eighteen. For all I say I often regret not finishing my PhD before having children and now as I write this I wonder if it is

all part of it. How will my research benefit from this huge disruption? One thing I can think of is that I have returned to being an ordinary person rather than an academic which I think is of great benefit when I consider how research can apply and be accessible to all people. You see the problem is that with many researchers embracing more subjective forms of research and inevitably researching themselves we could end up with lots of research done by academics on academics which could be quite disturbing! This returning to the real world also gives me a new perspective on the way research is represented. My mother-in-law said to me the other day that she had tried to read one of our (p&z) articles and said it went right over her head and she is by no means lacking in intelligence or academic understanding – so what about the average person on the street? But then is it realistic that the average person on the street would be looking at research? Why not? Nearly everyday on the news there is a story about, “a report out today” or “the latest research shows” and of course this is nothing like the research I do. I recognise more of the way I am trying to convey ideas in articles in newspapers about people’s experiences and even in columns. Other research isn’t accessible to anyone outside a specific field so why the interest? I wonder if my interest is more about getting people to *do* research than read about it – are they one in the same thing? I am getting lost and rambling so I will get back to the story.

I think I still felt connected with the university when I was pregnant with Oscar. I suppose it was inevitable that I would lose a sense of involvement after he was born. Babies take over lives as anyone will tell you. One barrier to my being able to work after having Oscar was that I thought I would be quite happy to leave him

with my mum while I worked but I didn't find it so easy once he was here. My mum had already had two grandchildren and so she wasn't exactly offering huge amounts of childcare. I also had my circle of mother friends and babies who I would spend the odd day with. Now I think of it I remember that I allowed myself Tuesday off work. So I was still working and I tend to convince myself that I haven't done any work for years but actually the only time I actually didn't even attempt to do any work was between being about six months pregnant with Alfie and when

I recently officially re-enrolled just over a month ago – so that would be, well it doesn't add up but I am sure it was about nine months. In a heuristic sense this would work as a period of incubation, my writing up hopefully being some kind of illumination.

After Oscar was born I did continue to work and I was doing some paid work for the university as well, a bit of teaching and other stuff which I think helped me feel connected with my research even when what I was doing was seemingly unrelated. I then had a wedding to plan, well my mum did pretty much all of it but I had to say, "yes" in all the right places.

I met some friends for lunch one afternoon and one of them asked me to give her a lift home because she was feeling unwell. That night me and ##### (I know I should say ##### and I but it sounds wrong) developed a terrible stomach bug, it was only a twenty four hour thing but for the next few days I had really bad, what felt like muscle pain. After a week I was forced to go to the doctors and mother

accompanied me to make sure I didn't play down my symptoms. The doctor listened to my explanation of, "it's nothing really I just strained my stomach muscles throwing up" and sent me home. I returned to the doctor after nearly collapsing at the Didsbury festival with a fever and chronic pains and this time saw someone who didn't have a medical textbook in front of them. I was sent straight to hospital with appendicitis. This was three weeks before the big day. I don't know how this relates to the research but it was a significant time in my life that comes to mind when I look back at the last few years.

I got married and then moved house when I got back and that was the beginning of my life in Heaton Moor. This was the true housewife life, coffee with friends, daytime television and I could walk to my mum's or to #####'s. With ##### I joined a local parent and toddler group which I still travel to because I enjoy it so much. Since having children I have spent hours talking with Karen about motherhood and specifically about being a stay at home mum and about the age at which we have children. If there has been a 'real life' research project that has happened organically then this is it. I also began to look at my fear of doing my work, which I began to call 'work apnoea'. This really helped me to move on with my research and make an attempt at writing the thing I had found so challenging. So what happened? Oh yes – Alfie!

Where I am now...

I suppose my story since Alfie has been born is completely different. I have moved from theoretically having the time to work – even if I felt like I never had the time or energy I now think that I did and I was finding ways of not working – to wanting to do it but actually really not having the time and like now I am so tired I could fall asleep right here but I do not have any time at all other than these hours in the evening when I just want to collapse in which to work. So why do I want to do it now? Is it the case of working against a deadline and now that a real deadline is really looming for me in lots of ways I feel the need to get it done – if I don't do it now I won't do it or something like that.

This year has been hard and stressful. Pregnancy with Alfie wasn't easy. I had some strange reaction to him and developed an itchy rash all over me. The fatigue – although I had experienced it with Oscar was unbelievable. Running around after a toddler while pregnant was so hard Jamie would ring me from work to see if I was alright and I would burst out crying blubbering, “no I am not” followed by a list of ways in which the day was getting more and more difficult and how tired and ill I was feeling. ##### would say, “ring your Mum, I'll ring my Mum get someone to take Oscar while you have a rest” but I am someone who rarely, pretty much never asks for help and I do not let people, apart from poor ##### know I need it so I soldiered on. Needless to say I gave up on the idea of getting the PhD finished pretty early into the pregnancy and I felt like I had failed. My own deadline had been to finish before I got pregnant again and then of course when I didn't do that it was to finish before Alfie was born in February.

The day after Boxing Day my Grandad, the grandparent I was closest to died. That morning we were all going to see him anyway as he was in hospital with pneumonia as well as being fairly advanced with Alzheimers and cancer. In the morning My mum rang early saying she had received a call and he was bad, Margaret (his wife) said come quickly and don't bring the children and she had said she didn't want me going as it was snowy, icy and she didn't want me going over the Pennines in my late pregnant condition. I said to my mum, "I am going no matter what because I don't think I'll be able to make it over again, last time I travelled over I was so ill the next day and anything could happen and I think this might be the last time I see him." My mum went very quiet and said, "That's the thing I think this is the last time any of us will see him, I think this is it". I am not sure what I did next I think I just went straight to the car and started scraping ice off it and it was when I was stood by the driver's door that I felt something behind me, turned around and there was nothing there. Immediately I thought, "why am I doing this – he's already gone". Sure enough when I got to my mums she said he had died. I think my mum is still devastated she didn't make it there in time and sometimes I am but most of the time I think of two things. Firstly I believe he came to see us all one last time, when I was scraping ice off my car, he didn't want to make contact he was just having a look at us for the last time and I know he knew I wanted to be with him and was trying to get there. The second reason I do not regret not being there is because the last time I saw him he was more together than I had seen him in years. He was in the hospital and I went with my mum and sister and we sat talking to him for ages. We had to introduce ourselves but he had an idea who we were and he spent the afternoon reminiscing and telling us things about his childhood even my

mum hadn't heard before and she talked with him about all kinds of things from when she was young.

My Grandma on my Dad's side died in March, I think three weeks after Alfie was born. As with my grandad her final gift to me was that the last good day she had was the day I took Oscar and Alfie (who she hadn't seen before) to see her. I feel blessed to have had such a good final memory of both my grandparents and it always makes me feel better about the whole thing. Loosing my granddad especially made me feel lost in terms of who I am. He was such a big part of my life when I was growing up that I felt like a little girl and it was the granddad I knew then that I lost. I suppose that is why I include my grandparents death in this account - because loosing both of them affected me so much and so of course has an effect on my research (although I don't know what).

During this whole time we were trying to buy our first house and having a low budget, being first time buyers and having two children to accommodate meant we were having difficulties. The process was so long a stressful I can't even begin to go into it because it will make me feel extreme panic. Then we had to move. It is only since moving that the stress of the death of two people I was very close to, moving house and the birth – oh yes I forgot that during all this I had Alfie so just let me go back a bit...

As with the pregnancy birth was more difficult with Alfie than Oscar. I was fitting all the way through labour which was more worrying for ##### than me. I was



exhausted afterwards in a way that I hadn't been with Oscar but of course I got discharged as soon as I could make the midwives let me out (I threatened to tie the sheets together and climb out of the window). I found myself more tired with newborn Alfie than I had been with newborn Osc but then again that was because every moment the new baby was asleep I just wanted to be with my other baby so I never got any rest – and to a certain extent that is still true. The idea that parenthood is difficult and stressful and all of that never got me with just Oscar but since having Alfie I have developed the 'I can't cope' element of being a mother. It isn't Alfie's fault he is an absolute dream and I adore him in every way it is all the other bits of life that go on. It is the Alfie/ Oscar combination that is difficult, it is the never ending feeling that nothing is ever done and yet I never have a minuet to myself.

Without Karen, who is my friend with two children the same ages as mine, I don't think I would cope at all. It is only having someone going through everything with me and bless her, not even coping as well as I do, that I can laugh about it all and keep going. Even writing this is weird because I love being a mum and being at home with my children, in fact I am so aware of my happiness, and that this is, or will be the happiest time of my life, that am scared by time passing and the idea that these days, where my children are small, will be over before I know it.

So what does all this have to do with my research? I am sure that my life influences my research and that the two are entwined in a way that means I cannot really see one without the other. The time passing thing is something that definitely runs between my life and my research – well the act of doing it anyway.

The fact that my PhD isn't finished is an endless personal problem for me and maybe this is part of not wanting the children to grow up – because I am not sure I am capable of working. I was talking with a friend of mine about my anxiety about turning thirty. She says it doesn't bother her at all and I think it is an issue for me because I don't feel I have achieved anything career wise – I haven't got a job. I feel years have slipped away from me and this gives me a block in being able to finish my PhD, I feel like I can't pick up all the threads, not because it's impossible but because of something that feels a bit like pride???

So where do I go from here and what do I do? What is the current situation? Well I have to fit work in between children and that generally means working in the evening when I am tired and I don't have the inclination and generally I am not at my best. I have just come from visiting Oscar's new pre-school where he will go one afternoon and two mornings each week and I am going to try and keep on a session on a Monday morning in Didsbury so hopefully this will free up some work time. I will still have Alfie but it is easier working with one child than two and my thinking is that on Oscar's morning sessions Alfie will go to sleep in the afternoon which will give me two slots during the day with just one child at a time meaning on some days I can have an almost full working day. All I know is that I need to get it done now and I have never given up anything in my life. Thankfully Jamie is working in the evenings too so I don't feel I am on my own. It is just a question of where do I begin and will it ever end?

## 5.2 – Take my word for it- I'll tell it how it is.

Writing my thesis has been a problem for me. For two reasons it has taken me a long time to even contemplate sitting down to write. The first reason is that I have searched for a way to present my research in writing that is in keeping with my approach but that can be understood by other members of the research community, and perhaps more importantly people who are not academics. The second barrier to being able to get my thoughts down on paper is an even bigger problem; it is something that goes beyond 'writers block' and is a kind of work block. I have become so afraid of finalising my work in a form that can be judged I am often more nervous about sitting down at my computer than I would be going to a job interview or to have my teeth pulled out.

Problem number one is actually part of my research and from the beginning of this project I wanted to investigate ways of presenting subjective research that were not restricted by following the framework of scientific, objective research reports. I felt that in trying to fit the outcomes of research that is more creative, unstructured, personal and interpersonal into a traditional format, the depth and quality of the research was lost.

It took me a long time to realise that this barrier in being able to write up my own research came from my inability to practice what I was trying to preach. I was

trying to work out how I could fit this complex web that was my vision of research into introduction, literature review, method, and results sections. Part of what I had learnt through the research I had done was that the research I found most engaging and easy to understand, and that other people seemed to be able to connect with was that where the researcher just told their experience in their own words, and in the words of their participants; they just told the story of their experience as it was, plainly stated their point of view and how their ideas had developed. This is what I must do – tell it like it is, stop being hung up on how to evidence things and hope people take my word for it.

The second problem was slightly more complicated, but not unrelated. I ended up turning this problem into part of my research. I decided to use my method of inquiry to research my inability to face my work as a way of identifying and working through the problem. I have reached some understanding of my ‘work apnoea’ which has helped me to move on in my studies and has also given me a chance to see how my approach to research can be used practically. I discuss this research later.

In the portion of my study on the communication of research ‘findings’ I looked at my own experience as a reader of research reports trying to understand other people’s research and I questioned how I find it easiest to write about my own research. I also worked with other people to find their reactions to written outcomes from research. I have decided that the best way to present research (for me at least) is to ‘tell it like it is’. Work with coresearchers (participants) in looking

at fictional, traditional, and true story examples of research reports showed how writing a story of the research and the researchers involvement in it was the most effective way of engaging the readers interest and encouraging the reader to reflect on their own experience and the extent to which they identify with the research.

# **Appendix 6**

## **Examples of Collaborative Inquiry Groups**

## Discussion

'The process of acceptance is based on the individuals promoting mutual goal accomplishment as a result of their perceived positive interdependence'

(Johnson et al 2003: 104)

As I entered the classroom for the first time I think the one thing I was concerned with the most was being accepted. I was walking into an anxiety-evoking situation, and felt a bit vulnerable. I was feeling anxious, I hate it when I first meet new people and they don't understand my accent at first being Irish. I always have to repeat myself about three times and by then the redness has crept up from my neck all over my whole face.

'Anxiety relates to the fear of looking foolish, of losing control, of being misunderstood, of being rejected, and of not knowing what is expected'

(Corey et al 1997: 177)

Even though I was getting in gear to accept this new situation, I was still willing to be accepting of these new people and to form a group with them. It was both exciting but nervous for me, the sudden acceptance of these new faces and characteristics, and the need to come together as a group to collaboratively work together as a team.

In the diary entry I mentioned of a girl ~~being~~ wanting to open up straight away with one of her problems, so at the beginning even though people were anxious there was a somewhat comfortable feeling within this group already.

Confidentiality was a central aspect in our group right from the beginning. We all agreed that no one would take anything that we had discussed in our sessions outside the four walls of our room.

'Confidentiality within a group is a central ethical issue related to group treatment. In order for members comfortably to discuss sensitive or intimate problems in the group, they must be confident that these problems will not be discussed outside the group.'

(Sundel, M et al 1985:441)

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To build on our chosen topic for research 'trust' we had done various activities, for example as mentioned in the diary entry hot seating. Through these kinds of activities we developed trust through being open with one another sharing our ideas, thoughts, feelings and reactions with each other.

' If all group members have communicated reciprocally with each other then, if these communications have been rewarding, an increased knowledge and familiarity will have arisen and the shared nature of the groups experience will have increased'

(Douglas 1983:71)

I have mentioned that I don't have much in common with [redacted] but for a group to achieve its goals and tasks not all the members will be or have the same personality. Everyone in our group was different, and brought some kind of quality to our group.

I feel that I do trust all the members in our group, in my diary I mentioned of confiding in my group about an empty house opposite me that I was unsure of. I asked their opinion on what they think I should do. I value and respect their opinion. Willingness to risk and trust involves opening oneself to others, being vulnerable, and actively doing in a group what is necessary for change. My group members assured me that it would be safer to phone the police, incase trouble from that house came to my front door.

A central characteristic of the working stage is group cohesion, which results from the member's willingness to let others know them in meaningful ways. Luckily in our group there wasn't many (if any) conflicts within it. I found that through the first few weeks and months we had bonded really well, and worked well as a group. We all had commonalities in that we were all very stressed with assignments and our dissertations, but even with our differences there was no hostility. Group work is about the idea of group development, because development is dynamic and can be seen as a process. Our group experienced a process of building and experiencing trust, of coming together and working as a team.

I guess the effects of Stewart's initial presence and my absence could have been addressed



authentic meaning." This story could be open to different interpretations but then every story is and so is the reality as experienced by each individual, no one will ever experience the exact same thing, therefore this is representative of my truth about the situation and the reader will decipher it based on their own experiences.

"The listeners take the story and re-shape it into another form, finding their own way of telling the tale." (Reason and Hawkins, p92) From the poem we complied as a group we each took it away to build on it with our own individual input to create something more. The use of a creative synthesis to reflect my experience provides a different perspective. "Given a willingness to listen and to learn, each individual story would be moderated by that of the others and a meta-story would emerge. This may still have fallen short of the totality of 'elephant' but it would represent a more complete understanding." (Wilkins, in Humphries, 2000, p147)

Reason and Hawkins suggest that myths and stories are used to analyse and explain meanings such as Freud's use of the Greek myth of Oedipus. (Reason and Hawkins, p80) I have tried to adopt this method in creating my own story using existing ideas from traditional stories that follow the same structure of the hopeless children being sent on quests to represent the experience and learning of the group.

I created the story to try and reflect my experience and what I thought other people were going. Thought is far from faultless and misses out so much vital information, without recounting minutes and spending years perfecting it, this had to be the case. I feel that I have tried to emulate a little piece of the other member's personalities, through my eyes. Obviously some of these were exaggerated to give a whole outlook of the things that came across as most important to that person.

To me it gives an air of how the people felt about attending this class and the confusion that surrounded it. It was a different approach to what most of us were used to and required input from us all for it to work, this didn't necessarily have to be in the form of a specific suggestion or constantly talking but taking part and being present. I attempted to show this from the story by explaining that people always brought different gifts none of which were of any less value than the others but just different. Which provides a better depiction of real life and makes our research more valid and applicable, because not everybody is outgoing and outspoken in the real world and some people are more trusting that other and everybody has different opinions on why we trust who we trust and so on. This is how it was in our group. This depiction is more about my journeys and me than anybody else's, evidently because I experienced them, I can only speculate on the experiences of others. According to Wilkins (in Humphries, 2000, p20) "Co-operative inquiry can have the aim of more traditional approaches to research - that is to add to the sum of 'knowledge' about a given topic ... Co-operative inquiry can also be developmental- that is to do with the personal growth of the inquirers." In my interpretation it can be seen that, although we may not have advanced any major theories, we gained knowledge of trust and built trust within the group, providing us with the experience of all areas of collaborative research, which provided the basis to produce our individual interpretation through a creative synthesis that reflects our personal journeys.

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weaker interest in the research. This will be explained further in this assignment, but I feel that it was due to personal understandings of the phenomenon that we were researching and our own personal demands.

At this initial stage it felt important to engage with the others. Heuristic inquiry views this stage as a personal reflective internal process, whereas co-operative inquiry focuses on an agreement between the participants and the initial research propositions. We had combined the two to offer a reflective internal search and by telling stories we were enabling feedback from others from their responses. By discussing our stories and common interests we began to engage in something. (That something I am still not sure of, this may be because we have not officially named it so that we can all understand it.) This seemed to be a democratic decision, the reason I say this is because we were all discussing and circling around the same area.

The initial phase in co-operative inquiry focuses on the need to 'structure' and decide how the research will be conducted. This we did not do, although there seemed to be an underlying acceptance that the research process would take us in the 'right' direction. This may have been due to the success of previous collaborative groups that ~~Paul~~ and ~~John~~ had participated in or a view that the research would evolve in its own time as and when we grew in understanding of each other and ourselves.

Reason & Heron (1986) highlight four different types of knowledge, these are; *experiential* knowledge that each person has from their own experience in the world. *Practical* knowledge this is knowledge used when doing something and demonstrating skill. *Propositional* knowledge that is knowledge about something expresses in statements and theories and finally, *presentational* knowledge, which is knowledge by which our verbal language cannot express.

It is said that presentational knowledge "forms a bridge between experiential knowledge and propositional knowledge." (Wilkins, P. 2000, pp20) In order to connect this gap as a group we often sat around a table with paper, crayons, pens and chalk individually

✓ putting down on the paper what ever we wanted to. Usually there was no structure to this time, but it often opened up new ideas. I found it very helpful as a way of expressing myself and understanding others expressions. I also feel that even without the use of the above instruments, and using storytelling instead, the energy around the table when the group sat down seemed to connect. These were times when our 'pre-propositional knowledge' and experiential knowledge opened up. (Mitchell-Williams & Wilkins. 2000. p6)

From these times we as a group began to immerse in the area that had risen. Moustakas outlines this stage as a "process that enables the researcher to come to be on intimate terms with the question – to live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it." (1990, pp28) Similarly Heron (1996) outlines a phase which he calls the *first action phase* where the "co-researchers become experiential inquirers." (1996, pp82) I also feel that at this stage in our process the group was engaging in the co-operative inquiry phase of experiential immersion, where we deeply immersed letting our own gut instincts and intuitive senses strengthen considerably. Heron (1996) explains this stage as "leading away from the original ideas and proposals into new ones they yield ground-breaking insights or unpredicted personal and social transformation." (pp84) Following this stage there are moments of enlightenment when the researchers suddenly arrive at new understandings or perspectives of the focus of research.

For me these were times when I connected to what we were researching. I remember times of personal immersion in the subject, leaving the research group and carrying the conversations and ideas that I had with me for days. Trying to relate it to every part of my life, whether past or present. I also feel that this was a significant time for the group where illuminations such as ties, bonds, relationships, disconnection and of course initially connections emerged. (or 'connectedness') In hindsight I feel that because we could not name our initial topic, so that everyone could understand it as the same thing the combination of co-operative and heuristic inquiries illumination phase did not interlink as a group. Due to this our own personal development and understanding of the topic emerged with our own understandings of the labels that had been presented.

I feel that for a while we all tried to convey our understanding of the labels to the group. But at the initial stage of this none of us realised that we all had a different understanding of the labels. Heron & Reason (1982) state that "our eagerness to know and our desire for new discovery is balanced by a fear of knowing, that clings to the safety of what we already know." (pp7)

Firstly we all had different experiences of the phenomenon and by telling our stories to the group we were able to convey our experiences. Benson (1987) comments that "storytelling can enhance conversation and communication skills and can be used to promote self-esteem, build confidence and foster co-operation." (pp226) It seemed that the group could only reply and echo experiences from their own frame of reference. This dishearten the group, because every time somebody expressed their story it would be followed by another story from another member of the group. Reflection was being made, but I feel that it was only in each individual after they had heard someone else's story. When we did realise that the labels that we had given to the phenomenon did not interconnect with everyone's understanding of it then there was some questioning as to whether we were researching connections, relationships etc.

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In hindsight I feel that this also happened at a group level. When ideas and suggestions were put forward in the group, initially there was excitement or interest. When further discussion developed into the idea the excitement and interest seemed to die. Leaving the group in a period of blankness and boredom. Although it was clear from the initial excitement that the group was not bored with the phenomenon or the group process it just seemed that we did not have the energy to develop the ideas and suggestions once the 'can had been opened'. Tudor (1999) highlights this well when he comments that "people who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and more easily because they are travelling on the thrust of one another." (pp186)



## Group Process

### My learning experience



When I decided to do this elective, I was pretty sure that there would be a lot of people from the interpersonal strand doing it too, nevertheless, I was still anxious as to who would form the group I was to spend my final year with.

██████ was from the organisational strand, I knew who she was by face but didn't really know her as a friend. Also, ██████ joined us. ██████ told us she was doing a PHD and was going to 'lead' the sessions more so than ██████. At first, this is what I expected, for ██████ to actually lead the group sessions though this was not really the case. In fact, the group became more integrated, with no one really leading, although I think we still always looked to ██████ for the answers.

I felt reasonably comfortable with everyone in the group, though I felt as if I needed to get to know some people better than what I already knew.

In the beginning, the main thing that we wanted to do was to find out why we were there and what was going to happen. ██████ soon made it apparent that we would be deciding on what would happen and I did half expect him to do that anyway!

I did feel positive about the elective even though I was unsure as to what would be happening. I thought that this would probably emerge through future discussions.

Right from the beginning, I was always aware of each person in the room and I tended to observe who spoke and those who were much quieter and it was the quieter ones that bothered me more. I wanted to know what they were thinking e.g. were they happy here? Did they have any ideas? Etc. I kept saying to myself that it is okay to be silent or quiet, but I have to say that I still got frustrated.

My main issue was that I felt quite positive and enthusiastic, I wanted to make it work and share ideas and so forth but it appears that others in the group did not share my enthusiasm and I had the feeling that myself and other people in

important here – for some the discussion about our socks didn't seem significant enough to make it into the short account that we produced.

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The individual accounts were read aloud to the group. One by one the accounts were shared and as they were I recognised things that I too wanted to have in the account but had 'missed' from my own account. I believe that other members of the group also felt this. Geiselman *et al* (1985 cited in Eysenck, 1998) developed a basic cognitive interview, which they based on knowledge of the human memory in order to improve eyewitness testimony. Part of this involves the use of multiple testimonies used as 'retrieval cues' for eyewitness to enable them to recall a greater number of details. For me, this is the part of how the report was formed – we shared our individual testimonies and 'reminded' one another of aspects of our story.

The group account describes three stages of the group. The first section 'In the beginning we were...' describes who we feel that we were at the beginning of the elective. The things that we describe here, 'individuals', 'uncertain', 'anxious' and 'distance' suggest that we were in the first stage of the group process. Tuckman (1965, cited in Forsyth, 1999) suggests that there are five stages of a group, beginning with orientation and conflict. It is these two stages that I feel are described here in the first section of 'our story'. In orientation members of a group become familiar with one another and in conflict the members feel tension and experience some disagreement regarding the tasks ahead of the group. I also feel that some elements of the third stage of structure can be found in the group account. In this stage the group develops norms and roles become established. Roles were clearly established if we were able to give people characteristics within the group that are found in the initial verse. The fourth stage of goal achievement and the fifth stage of dissolution are less clear in the group account. The absence of dissolution in the account perhaps reflects the absence of a clear dissolution of the group.

The group account clearly tries to reflect the feelings of trust and love that we felt for one another within the group. I'm sure that those feelings can be accurately described to the outside world – how do you describe emotions? Eysenck (1998) takes five pages to try to define emotion, so clearly it is a complex process. Emotion is comprised of many aspects, and the emotional content of our time as a group is not expressed in our account. This brings me to self-disclosure. Self-disclosure requires an attitude of love and trust (Jourard, 1971). Within the confines of the group, we had this. We don't feel the same about the outside world. We chose to share with the group; we did not choose to share with everyone. For this reason the details of our group are absent from the group account. As Jourard (1971) discusses, self-disclosure is most likely when the other is perceived as trustworthy and one who is



our time together I feel the group has provided us with an insight and understanding of new issues, which has allowed me to increase my knowledge and awareness, that before, I may have been blind to. For example, cultural and personality differences, social lifestyles, openness to difference, but generally just an understanding of others norms and value.

I personally believe the group has allowed others and myself to develop and grow due to the process of change, which I have observed through group dynamics and the increasing self-disclosure, honesty and confidence within the sessions (material based on personal diary and e-mail material). I feel this notion of growth relates both to the group and the individuals within it because the empty uncomfortable silences have reduced and the communication has become richer and far more collaborative. I believe this is based on the reduction on absences, negative and static atmospheres, which I feel was due to the inclusion of comfort zones and the lack of unstructured task and communication strategies. Because of this change I feel I have been allowed to relax and become more supportive to wards others and the group, it has also allowed me to understand myself with reference to the behaviour and actions of others. Therefore learning to adapt, because of this I am thankful to the group and I personally believe the interaction has allowed me to make changes in my attitude towards life and the richness it has to offer.

Throughout the time we have spent together I feel it has been an emotionally charged process, which at times has promoted an element of communication difficulty, whereby I have found it difficult to interact, however this has improved and so has the group. I believe these concepts occurred because of the factors of trust, confidence and comfort with regards to being open and free to express one-self, and to communicate without being judged. At times this has been a scary concept because of the high levels of self-disclosure. I feel this was a major part of the group process, through the hot seat experience and the mini group tasks such as show and tell "special things" and the explanation of self with the use of an object "sock". These tasks, the use of the e-mail system and the book, have been a vital concept in the bonding process of the group; it has allowed us to feel accepted and understood because of the personal element and personal meanings involved.

phrases so that they follow on from each other. It was evident at this point, that collectively we could form a poem from all of our phrases. [redacted] then started arranging the second pile of phrases. As [redacted] and [redacted] were organising them, the rest of the group were advising them on where to position each line and what words should be erased in order to fit into the patterns that were forming, I think [redacted] and [redacted] were very effective as team-workers and decision-makers because they both were very good at organising the poem and at the same time, they were taking into account the opinions of each group member which, in my opinion, shows they have good team-working skills. The involvement of each group member, demonstrates the motivation and enthusiasm we had when carrying out this task. 'Group members also exert more effort when they feel that their contributions to the group are indispensable, when they feel others will not free-ride, when the group's goals are clear and challenging, and when they are confident in their group's ability to reach it's goals (collective efficacy)' (Forsyth 1999).

Once we had completed the poem we had to decide where [redacted] poem, [redacted] short story and [redacted] words would be positioned, as they didn't fit into the three stanzas and we all felt that they should be included. We went through the normal decision-making process 'orientation...discussion... decision making... and implementation.' (Forsyth 1999). We eventually came to a unanimous decision that we should have the poem at the beginning as an introduction, the story would be positioned after the introduction and before the poem, and the words should be put into the appendices. Marie then carefully collected all the phrases in the correct order so it would be easy to create a final, typed copy, which was to be emailed to everyone through our 'yahoo groups' email system.



This group was not open and supporting and we all have a role to play in that lack. My own might be that I was open but in a confrontational way and there were reasons for this. One of these was that there was 'history' between me and two of the other members of the group who I felt made promises they did not want to keep because they did not like me but were too afraid to say so (my interpretation). The other reason was I felt separated and distanced because of my reaction to another member of the group's portrayal and representation of an experience she had. I was horrified both by her representation and by the lack of reaction from all the other group members and I began to wonder whether people, myself included, truly hear themselves speak. This episode caused me to distance myself from the other group members and contributed to my being confrontational. The above probably had an impact on what could be referred to as group efficacy. Group efficacy in this instance refers to the ability of a group to complete a task and the way in which group members interact with each other (Pescosolido, 2001).

Previous to attending university I had had experiences of working as part of a team but none of these prepared me for the experiences that I had of group work here. In year two I, along with everyone else on the course, was put into a position where we had to find ourselves groups to work with. My experience of the 'real world' was that it did not matter to me who I worked with or whether I liked them, we had a goal in that we had a piece of work to complete and we all had to work hard in order to achieve this successfully. I think this could be said to be an example of group cohesion (Brown, 2000). However, my 'real world' experience did not translate itself to my experience of university. When I initially found myself at university I was transported back to my days at school, which contrary to what adults always told me were not the best days of my life by any stretch of the imagination, indeed I am still waiting for the best days. I found myself reacting as if I were that skinny, quiet, industrious, loner that I was at school rather than remembering all the positive experiences that I brought with me from working. This reaction of mine set a pattern and shaped my experiences here and I have spent a great deal of time and energy attempting to resolve these difficulties. The experience of year two was a setback as it caused me no small amount of upset and anguish. Again I had to find the strength to stand-alone and say my piece and let go of enough of my hurt in order to successfully complete the project but it was hard work. I was not worried about joining this group, as I believed I had successfully let go of all the hard experiences of working with groups but perhaps I had not.

I aim to travel further down the co-operative inquiry road and examine the four phases of what Reason and Heron (1986) call action and reflection and see where my experience of this research fits, or not. Phase 1 is where the co-researchers agree on a subject of inquiry, in this instance by default (it seemed), it was connections. This phase can examine a characteristic of experience or carry out some more practical skill or task. The means by which what transpires within the group is observed and recorded is agreed. Connections could be considered to be an example of particular and personal experience. There were suggestions of keeping a journal (if one so wished), which I did do. At a later stage there was the suggestion of creating a scrap book to record and save the work carried out within the group but while everyone agreed it was a good idea it was left to the tutor to actually look after the work produced by the group.

Phase 2 (Reason and Heron, 1986) then is the application of the ideas and any procedures agreed during phase 1. It could involve the observation and recording of one's own and other people's behaviours and the results of these. I did not do much recording of other people's behaviour so I may have lost any number of subtle experiences or nuances that was occurring within the group. It was deliberate because it was my experience and I did not want to miss the opportunity of personal development by concentrating on my interpretation of other people's behaviour. I find that, for myself, when I concentrate too much on other people I lose my own way and begin to put too much emphasis on what I think other people are thinking about my behaviour.

I wonder why you see these as so separate? Although I see and accept your reasons 2



position in class, yet as he is the supervisor, wherever he sits automatically is seen as a high status seat.

Observing the processes towards acceptance in the group demonstrates the value of this group dynamic. I feel that our group has been very open to accepting each other and especially acknowledging [redacted] and [redacted] as members of our group. As mentioned earlier, attendance and reliance are key factors in increasing the chance of acceptance and if [redacted] and [redacted] had arrived on a more regular basis, perhaps I would feel more open to forming a more secure relationship.

The atmosphere of the group was amiable and I looked forward to discussing our aims on a weekly basis. 'If you can dream and reminisce, accepting each other's past may be adventurous'. This line exemplifies a feeling that even though there were feelings of anxiety among certain members, the group was a friendly environment and our discussions could lead to an exciting journey towards discovering ourselves. My feelings unfortunately are distant in the way that I do not feel like the group members know me for who I am. Not being in my home environment and the tension of completing my work in good time does not allow them to get to know me on a personal basis. This is because I need a lot of time to devote to my work and so I do not socialise with my classmates. I am a friendly, open and fun person to be around, yet at university, I seem to be very caught up in my work. Sometimes, I wish I could be more easy-going at university.

### TRUSTING

The group appear to know me as a negative and unsatisfied individual who does not seem happy with what has been achieved. However there is a nicer side to me to discover. The third verse of the poem discusses the concept of trust and to what extent I feel trust has developed. 'If we discover ourselves and learn, trusting each other is what we yearn'. This line illustrates that if we learn about trust as a group, perhaps trusting each other would be the next step. Regrettably, this verse considers how uncertain I feel about the results of the group and the lack of trust I feel has developed. Primarily, I feel that this is due to my hesitance and anxiety to trust others who I do not know very well. I see this as a criticism of myself, as past experiences have led me to scrutinise people to the core before trusting them with personal information about myself or people close to me. This may also be due to certain bitterness as to how the world sees my religion. Even though I am proud of my religion and am happy to talk about it in class, I feel that it is my duty to teach the group members about Judaism so as to show them not to believe what they hear on the British news.

As a result of observing the group processes, developing and maintaining a level of trust among members is crucial for the group to function effectively. Every member offering to help, dividing the group's work and contributing to the accomplishment of building trust will provide the group with an aim to reach their targets. If the level of trust is high, group members will feel more open to share their thoughts. Johnson and Johnson (1997) suggest that members create a climate of trust to reduce a fear of betrayal. This will

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Secondly there is an admiration of their intellectual knowledge, that although I have no in depth understanding I connect to their expression, comprehension and knowledge. This may be a reflection of something that is already inside of me but for me it is something that I cannot ultimately connect with myself. This has happened many times whilst I have been at University.

Connections can also be made with others by using non-verbal communication and verbal communication. Although I feel that my own inner knowledge will be aware of the connection before any words are spoken. Again it is a sense that I feel. This can be as insignificant as a smile or it can be an inner tingle in your tummy when you see someone. The latter exists before language and conversation. It can even exist before non-verbal behaviour. For example the other day I received an e-mail from someone and as I saw the name my tummy tingled. (I went out with person 2 years ago and have not spoken too since we broke up) I suppose it may be linked to my unconscious, a strong part of me that 'knows'. It is a knowledge that I feel inside myself that something either outside or already a part of me is there, awake, alive and vibrant. The only way I can think of describing the way this feels is in terms of a cup of tea first thing in the morning and you are really hungry, you can feel the warmth of the tea inside you, warming you up.

When a connection is made with someone at any level, whether spiritual, emotional, mental or physical I feel as individuals we retain some of that experience. This is the basis of my belief that connections are within me. Whatever that individual has to offer, I will retain what I need and have learned and carry it with me. Whether the connection is dormant or active, past and present. It is never forgotten; just because it is not playing a main role in my life does not mean that they do not exist. But I feel for them to be present there has to have been some connection of a similar nature that makes me realise the present connection. Therefore there has to be an association in my memory to the event to reflect upon.



In this essay I intend to present my understanding of the topic of 'connections' and offer an explanation as to why I believe as I do and the reading that has informed this view. I begin this essay with an admission. I have struggled to write this essay, from beginning to end. My struggles were around what I should include, what I should not include, was I exposing myself, how was I exposing myself and how did I feel about that which I had exposed. I am worried about the structure, the focus, the language and the way in which I have attempted to marry experience and literature. I begin this essay with a discussion around my ethnicity and the feeling of difference that I have perpetually carried with me. This sense of difference is important as I react in certain ways and carry certain beliefs because of this sense and it marks me. I introduce notions of connections, of language, of autobiography, and of a fragmented self in need of healing. I use Moustakas' heuristic inquiry model and match my experience of working my way through connections to this model. There is a conclusion, of a sort, a recognition, an acceptance, a sense of peace which is more than just applicable to this essay, it is applicable to this experience.

My difference, as mentioned previously, is most important to me. It would be impossible for me to divide my Irishness from my womanhood because both mark me as 'other' in this country, whereas being a woman marks me as 'other' in the country of my birth. There is a dissonance, an unease, a friction, an itch I cannot scratch in both being a woman and Irish in this country. Ultimately it is a feeling of difference, of distance, which is easier to bear here than it was in the country of my birth.

My identity, if there is such a thing, is fragmented due to the colonising experience. The effect of colonisation results in the identity of being Irish as an experience where one recognises that one belonged to a country that was effectively owned by another country. Learning to master the language imposed on the people of that country is an experience that can cause the person to take on a culture not their own at the same time as living within their own culture. The very fact of mastering that language can lead one to be even more alienated from one's own culture but the risk of rejecting it is to risk being side-lined as an historical non-entity. This identity, while containing tension and confusion, remains intact while situated within the confines of the native land but once taken from there the migrant is challenged by the materiality, the reality of her own identity (Greenslade, 1992).

So with a fragile identity and no knowledge of what lies ahead, what does the migrant experience? Perhaps she is reminded of the differences that exist between her and the majority of the people she is surrounded by. Perhaps she will have to cope with racism, discrimination, exploitation or stereotyping. There are two possible strategies, one is, the migrant attempts to make herself more acceptable to the coloniser, a strategy which is not likely to succeed. Secondly, the migrant can try and disappear, this works in a very limited way however as the migrant becomes visible at work and within education at which intersections cultural inferiority claims can be levelled at her (Greenslade, 1992).

The above explanations sit well with me. I feel that they explain and describe some of the feelings of upheaval, of confusion, of despair at times at recognising this difference but being unable to codify it for myself.

For this reason, connection as a topic was one that immediately felt important to me. It did not become, to me, a topic that had been 'done to death'. That I would return again and again to the place where I asked what a connection was, what it was not, how it had changed, what other labels I could apply, how to dissect and immobilise this experience did not mean for me that the topic was over exposed. What it exemplified was the lack of a language, a picture, a metaphor, a colour, a song, a poem, a story that would somehow capture the feeling. Ever tried to catch a moonbeam in a jar?

Perhaps autobiographical information would be useful at this point, but what to include and what to leave out? This has been a process of researching, learning, revisiting and, thankfully, coming to a place of peace. I believe that there is a way to offer a flavour of the thoughts and processes that took place throughout this experience. To that end I include within the text examples of poetry which try to express some of the emotion / experience produced throughout this process. In this way I seek to lay out my position as a researcher within this process and the flaws, prejudices, perceptions and inadequacies that go to effect how I have learned (Stanley and Wise, 1993).

used to daydream about living there with the local people, speaking their language and being treated as one of them. I also had a clear picture in my mind about what the scenery of the country would look like (I did not know then that I was daydreaming about the landscape of southern Africa). The best way I can explain this is to use someone else's words, specifically Kuki Gallman's in her book "I Dreamed of Africa" (p 9)

"He began, in those days, to talk to me about Africa and the nomad tribes of the desert, which fascinated him. Soon he started travelling there regularly, beginning a love affair with the Sahara which will live as long as he. I joined him a few times..... But it was not my Africa."

I had a strong desire to go to Africa from a very young age, and after my A Levels I was accepted to volunteer with Project Trust. For some reason I was not surprised when from a choice of hundreds of projects all over the world, they assigned me to a rural village in Zimbabwe. All I had specified was that I did not want to work in a city. I was not worried about not liking it, I knew I would, and as soon as I stepped off the plane in Harare, I thought, "yes, this is it". The only feeling I can compare this to is when I first realised that I was in love. I had thought I was in love numerous times before then, until I met my partner Stuart, and I thought, "What have I been doing? Of *course* this is how it is meant to be"

So this was how Southern Africa felt for me. As far as I know, none of my traceable ancestors have ever been there, nor was I told stories of it by anyone like a role model during my childhood. My passion for the place seemed to just develop (according to my parents when I was around the age of six).

The facilitator of the group, PW, in his piece on being connected, suggested that his connection to Africa was spiritual, deep and ancient, and again I will use an extract from Gallman's book (p 8) to emphasise my feelings on this;

"The desire to go to Africa seemed to have been an obscure yearning to return, a nostalgic inherited need to migrate back to where our ancestors came from. It was a memory carried in my genes. The urge to fly home, like the swallows."

I felt immediately like I belonged in Africa, it was an instant, unquestionable certainty, and this made me feel connected in a way I did not know was possible.

To summarise, a connection is a positive feeling. It can be towards anything but for me at this point in my life, I have experienced connections to people, places, and myself. I believe that for a true lasting connection to be made between two people, they must respect each other, be at peace with each other, and to both value that connection equally highly. I feel that it is possible to connect briefly with someone unknown, and although this is equally as positive and can leave a lasting impression, it is not on the same scale. I believe that there is some ancestral instinct within us that connects us to places, and that when someone feels this connection, they will always, by choice or chance, find themselves following this urge and going there, if they are not already there. I believe that to gain inner connectedness, I must find peace by having a visible and strong purpose to what I do with my life, as well as being on good terms with everyone who matters to me. I also believe that there is no rule for what each person needs to be connected to themselves, this is a completely individual and subjective concept. Finally, I myself feel a great deal more connected within myself after writing this essay, as I feel a heightened



## Collaborative Research Elective 2002/3

### Group Depiction

#### Who We Were, What We Did, What We Became

##### In the Group ...

The lioness accepted and brought warmth  
The koala bear, the little voice calmed and stabilised  
The monkey full of thoughts, open, honest and colourful  
The panda emotional and vulnerable but loved  
The hyena, vibrant and bubbly and brings honesty  
The owl relaxed and mysterious and reflective  
The badger facilitated, became the honest heartbeat  
The 'pretty' horse the leader who is respectful and focused  
The leopard careful and mysterious, an honest thinker  
The elephant colourful and humorous yet caring  
The tortoise quiet, yet reflective and thoughtful  
The gazelle the dreamer, vulnerable and soft?

*We have deliberately acted to engender a sense of trust and warmth. We have done this through encouraging and supporting self-disclosure and by exploring our relationships within and without the group. Significant movements have occurred when someone has taken a risk, shared their emotional world, whatever. This has all led to individuals making reference to our shared experience as 'transformative'/'developmental'.*

##### In the beginning we were ...

Individuals, silent, vulnerable but special and unique  
Coming together like clockwork, through wanting and for the need to feel free.  
Repetitive, hot and bothered, but yet still gentle and loving like the pulse of a heartbeat.  
We were a group of friendly individuals:  
Uncomfortable, uncertain, insecure, uninvolved, separate.  
Seeking knowledge and enlightenment  
A collection of anxious, worried, unconnected individuals.  
We were in a state of confusion. We did not know what was going to happen.  
There was definitely a slight awkwardness and a few uncomfortable silences, the impression of a slight identity crisis.  
We didn't really know who we were as a group or what we were meant to be doing.  
There was a sense of knowing it would come together – but we were not sure when and how and for what purpose.  
There was a distance between us and we were unsure how to close that gap.  
We were unsure, lost and couldn't see the road ahead.  
Frustration circulated.

We laid the foundations:

Single, anxious, expecting, reserved, superficial, careful, clean, individual.  
The unknown, unsure of what to do, or where we were expected to go.  
Frustration, awkwardness, solemn silence  
We were individuals

What we did?

Not a lot.

We just spent time together

Listened to each other

Gained an interest in each other's personalities

And then did the hard work to actually get to know one another on a deeper level.

Through understanding warmth and listening

Intimate, honest, trusting and emotional

We have *become* through breaking down our very 'being'.

We were scared but not afraid.

Like small children on their first day at play.

Open to the world of unknowing, but yet still knowing in some way.

We began to share and open ourselves:

Accepting, comfortable, involved, deep, supported, loyal, developing

We set out on a journey of self-discovery.

Through sharing and opening we developed into a trusting, caring, loving entity

Then it became a place of discovery through being honest and open.

We talked and were silent.

We talked about anything' relationships, T.V., family, uni work, politics, race, religion.

There was some element of confusion re. The assignment.

This gave us a connection and made us a bit more familiar – something in common.

The key was communication.

We began to explore and relate with one another.

From this we began to find that we were heading in the right direction

Reaching somewhere

We didn't necessarily know where that was.

We built trust, respect;

One big friendship developed.

We shared, disclosed, related and reflected.

Engaged, shared, showed ourselves, questioned, learnt, exposed, opened, took in, widened to surround the group.

'We were like caterpillars ready to metamorphose into butterflies, to burst together into the New Age' (*The Celestine Prophecy*).

The energy, growth and creativity have helped to facilitate change, somehow, somehow.

The feelings we all know, love and cherish but to explain is still too far away ...

We are a close and secure unit:

Stronger, closer, energised, loyal, positive, special.

We have the ability to share our inner thoughts and feelings.

We have developed a sense of unity and have established a warm and secure sanctuary in which we can feel at ease with ourselves and one another.

Individuals and a group;  
Respected as both, respecting both.  
Insulated from the outside world  
A pack, a herd that cares for one another  
Helps one another  
Assists one another  
Loves and trusts one another  
Guides one another.  
Now we reside in one big safety network,  
A circle  
A bond  
An enclosure that others cannot break.  
Deep, enriched, connected, in touch, ready to begin, close, understanding, related,  
comrades, ourselves, separate lives in one.  
We understand each other better.  
We work well together  
We've formed a bond  
A bond that has helped us to develop as a group  
But also as individuals.  
We have a better understanding of how groups work.  
It takes each group member to be present to make a group work well.  
We have built up a trust.  
We are now at the end of the journey.  
A close group who have bonded well.  
We are close, trusting, focused, together, exclusive, attached ...  
There is a sense of closure  
Knowing that we have come to  
The end.

## **Appendix**

Shells > Being Aware > Raw (core, essence) (Then should we build up)

Young/innocent > fighting/exposed/risk > comrades

Superficial > opened > deep/ourselves

Being individual > showing ourselves > group/bond

Individual > widened > round

## Appendix 1

### Group Product 9/3/04

#### 1 The Beginning

Risk taking                      'Checking out others'

Apprehension

Close the door

How much to show, how much to hide

Looking for familiar faces

Being Accepted

'I did this,' I say or 'I feel that'

Who to trust?

How do we feel & What do we do?

A picnic, hot-seating, a night in the pub

#### Being Accepted

Trust as an essential factor soon diminished (apprehension)

Trying to become accepted

Exchanging stories

Personal

Your smile is warm, you hold and encourage me

Atmosphere?

'I feel safe, I know you heard me

#### Trusting

Learning about trust



## Appendix 1

Could we be more trusting of other group members?

As a group we are fairly predictable

Share some values

Have shared boundaries

Feel a sense of faith

Trust in this group has been created by our desire to have trust

### Closure

We have finally come together as a group, the atmosphere has become more comfortable

Meeting weekly has been an interesting adventure and it is unfortunate that at a time when so much more could be discovered that it's coming to an end.

Everyone is bothered about the group and enjoys being a member of it – that leads us to cooperate when it's most important.

My heart expands to make yet more room for you.

There is a sense of belonging to the group, we have bonded and maybe become friends

Time has led us to possibly trust more/learn more

Something about the group that stops us trusting

# Appendix 7

## The Hot-Seat Experience

The Hot-Seat Experience

### *My experience of the hot-seat*

I first took part in the hot-seat exercise as an undergraduate. This technique allowed each member of the group to share something about themselves and it allowed fellow group members to question the individual on aspect of their life and personality they were interested in.

The main thing to come out of this experience was a mutual understanding of one another and a group bond. In particular I think that we developed acceptance of each other's feelings and experiences. I realise this with hindsight and as a result of the work I have done on both group research in general and the hot-seat exercise itself. However, at the time I was aware of the change in the group relationship even if this wasn't verbalised or recorded.

I remember sitting in this circle of people who I hadn't known for very long but who I felt I could share myself with. In the middle of the circle a girl is crying and I had asked the question that made her cry. Somehow I don't feel bad about making her cry because as she talks about a painful experience other members of the group begin to smile warmly, like a parent smiling at a child, and for some group members tears begin to fall as they take on board the story of this person who at that moment is just a little girl. I do not feel bad because this person is sharing something she wants to share with us. We understand her in a different way to before, we have a deeper understanding of her and suddenly we all realise that we cannot judge each other, we must try to understand our fellow group members. This is where a deep level of acceptance and trust developed.

This experience was part of my level one introduction to the interpersonal specialisation of my degree course. Two years later as level three I chose an elective in co-operative experiential inquiry (Reason and Heron, 1986), largely because of my experience of working in an

‘experiential’ group at level one. In this inquiry group we used the hot-seat as a research tool to interview one another about ‘life stages’; the topic of our study (this research is discussed in more detail in the published paper Wilkins et al 2002 see appendix 3). Even though we did not keep to the research focus in the questions we asked the hot-seat interviews informed us about the lives of our co-researchers and contributed to our understanding of life stages and the meaning they held for that group of individuals.

Three years later I was working with an inquiry group as part of my PhD research. We chose to use the hot-seat technique to explore our understanding of ‘relatedness’. In fact some members of the group report that we were using the exercise to research our topic, whereas others say the purpose was to get to know one another. I don’t think these ideas are exactly distinct from one another as in learning about each other we learnt about how we related within the group. Whatever our intentions, the outcome of the exercise was an increased bond within the group, increased self-understanding for the individual members, and a movement forward in terms of the research itself. Before the hot-seat experience many members of the group felt the research was stagnating and that we were not moving forwards. Taking part in an activity provided a focus and gave every member the space to both talk and to listen. The following section is a synthesis of reports of the hot-seat experience from the members of this group. The group elected to write about the hot-seat experience for one of their assignments which was part of the undergraduate course. Although the group had no choice in the fact that they had to

produce a piece of work it was a group choice that the hot-seat experience should be the focus which illustrates the importance of this exercise both in terms of the group process and the individual learning of each group member.

My research on the hot-seat experience started with my first encounter explained above as I processed the experience and the experience itself was 'data' that has contributed to my understanding of research. It is only now that I have focused my attention on this area of the research approach I have become engaged in that I reflect on the importance of this activity. Working with the reports from the 'relatedness' group has become a piece of reflexive research in its own right. Through reading the reports I have confirmed my feelings about the hot-seat as a personally developmental process. I have been reminded of elements of this process that I had forgotten about. I have questioned my assumptions about the way other people experience this activity. I have built up a picture of the hot-seat experience and an understanding about how it can be used as a research tool. This is a result, a finding, but a level one outcome which is valuable but until communicated it does not contribute to other people's understanding.

In searching for a way to construct a representation of my understanding (i.e. report my findings) I took quotes from my co-researchers reports. This was also to facilitate a stage two analysis of my research (this is a reflection on how I have developed my understanding). As I went through the quotes I had picked out it seemed to me that they read like one piece of writing so I decided to work them together so that they became one story. This gives a representation of the way I understand the hot-seat experience as my understanding is a collage of what I have heard other group members say on a

background of my own experience, finally framed by my own interpretation which is given here.

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*How did the hot-seat idea come about?*

We needed a focus, the problem which we were trying to solve was, 'what shall we do now?' Some members of the group were getting restless and felt time in the sessions was being wasted although everyone turned up each week except in extreme circumstances. It felt like we should be there. I feel that the members made a commitment to come even though sometimes, especially in the early meetings, it seemed like very little was happening. We made a commitment to attend, and when someone questioned if they should come when they were 'unhappy', it was decided that even then they should make the effort to come.

Other ideas were discarded for a variety of reasons, one idea in particular was discarded because it was considered too much of a risk. It was something about members of the group explaining what their preconceptions were of you, and comparing them to how you really are, or how you see yourself. This was a bit of a scary prospect and perhaps we were not close enough as a group to face the possibility of criticism. However, much of this idea became incorporated into the hotseat experience.

The hot-seat was an idea in which our group would get to know each other better, feel more comfortable and open with one another. Once the idea had been introduced it gave the group a task to focus on. The main aim as a group for the hot-seat was to learn more about each other and see each other as 'wholes'. The hot-seat experience stemmed from

the groups anxieties to understand the groups function of relating and to create a meaning to our process of relating and group relationship. This involved exploring and understanding each individual within the group as a process of group relating.

When the idea of doing the hot-seat was first addressed, there was a sense of dread within the group. Perhaps this was because it was the first time we actually had to truly express something personal about ourselves and our lives. This seemed a scary thought. However, after further thought and consideration there now seemed a sense that it was the natural thing to do, after all we were there to see how we related and worked together within groups.

*The Order of the Hot-Seat: why did people take the seat when they did?*

As people began to take the hot-seat and cohesion in the group grew, the later hot-seats were more revealing than those at the beginning were. I had already seen most of the group pass through before me, had seen how other people reacted to their answers and had confidence that my own hot-seat experience would be received in a similar way. I was very curious about what people might want to ask me so I volunteered to go next.

I was desperate to have my turn. For some reason I couldn't wait to have my go, and the fact that we didn't have a pre-planned order, meant the waiting was agonising. I remember I used to lie awake every Wednesday night thinking of all the possible questions I could be asked, and how I would reply. There was so much information about myself that I wanted to share with the group, and so every time when it was someone else's turn I used to wonder if I would be next.

On the day of my hot seat, Paul asked who wanted to go next. Based on what I said above, one could not be blamed for assuming that I jumped up straight up. But I didn't. Why was this? I think I did not want to come across too eager, as if I thought I was really interesting and that everyone should want to find out about me. No I waited... and waited... then I blurted out "I'll do it" and made my way to the chair. I was worried that if I'd left it any longer someone else would have volunteered.

*How did it feel asking questions and being in the audience?*

I really enjoyed the whole questioning role, not so much asking the questions, rather that I liked being part of the questioning group. Discovering answers and gaining knowledge of the person in the hot-seat. Because I enjoyed the role of questioner I also think it made the hot-seat more appealing... I was actually looking forward to my turn in the hot-seat. I was curious what people would want to know about me.

One member, however, said that most of the time she did not find it as fulfilling as she had first hoped. Sometimes she found it a useful tool for clarifying certain things about other people, but at times she wasn't that interested. I enjoyed learning more about my group members when they were in the hot-set then I did when I was in the hot-seat. I was curious to know about each and every member and was interested in what they had to say. As they spoke I sensed myself listening attentively and relating with what they were expressing.



There were a set of questions that became the norm to ask, for example the animal question, the 'what time would you like to have lived in' and the 'happy place' question.

I didn't really ask many questions, I preferred simply listening to whoever was in the hot-seat at the time, I found it interesting seeing what information about themselves they wanted 'us' as the observers to know.

Was there something to learn about myself by the questions I asked and who I asked them to? I think so. In reflection, the types of questions I asked certain members certainly revealed how comfortable I was with that person. I found that what I wanted to ask others was actually more to do with what I wanted to be asked personally. I wonder now why this was. *I think there may have been things she wanted to tell us.*

*Did questions relate to what we already knew about someone?*

Some of the questions I was asked, appeared to be worded in a way as if they knew what the answer was going to be, which I was not quite sure about. I felt as though I was changing my answer to fit the question, rather than just answering it.

In a previous e-mail sent by Paul (30/01/03) he questioned whether some individuals within the group use the hot-seat experience as a way of giving their perception of a particular person. While I do agree that we shaped questions to try and fit the individual within the hot-seat, I do not think that I personally used the experience as a way of telling

people what I thought of them. In fact I think I used this experience as a way of exploring individuals in a more detailed way and coming to my own conclusions at a later date.

The questions regarding any of the things we already knew seemed, to me, to be more for clarification rather than as something new to learn. *I had a feeling of getting a picture of Aoife and maybe this is what clarification does.*

I found I preferred some questions to others. I did enjoy being asked “if I could be anyone, fictional or non-fictional”. I think these types of questions stirred my imagination as well as giving me the opportunity to show my true colours in an indirect way. *Does this mean giving us a ‘sense’ of her?* Some questions I didn’t like as much, not because they were difficult to answer or brought back difficult past memories, but mainly because I has been asked them so many times before and I wanted to explore myself further during my hot-seat experience. *So rather than us asking about what we already knew she wanted to learn more about herself through our questions about who she is.*

*Did we say what we had intended to say?*

I’d often sit there in absolute concentration, both listening and applying some of the question answers to myself and thinking of the answer I would have given if I’d been asked than particular question. By the time it was my turn to go in the hot-seat, I’d already rehearsed many of the answers to some of the regular questions in my head numerous times... but all the answers I had previously planned were soon forgotten once I took to the chair.

I had prepared answers to the questions I thought I would be asked (the ones that had been asked to others) However, no one asked me them. During the hot-seats of others I found myself answering their questions in my head and found there was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to tell. The questions that I did get asked I could not answer, my mind went blank. I felt as though I must have come across as being really boring, the only answers I seemed to give were 'I don't know', which really annoyed me.

I think the professor asked me about my happiest moment or a time when I was most happy and I could not think of anything which must have looked dreadful. Obviously I have had numerous happy times, but everyone must have been thinking I am miserable.

As soon as I sat down in the hot-seat I could not remember a single thing that I wanted to say. I feel very comfortable within the group, I felt I could really open up without the fear of being judged. When I was in the hot-seat, I don't really believe the questions asked of me allowed me to truly express myself which in a way annoyed me as I had built myself up to the level where I wanted to be open and it was challenging. Thus I found myself expanding on questions and taking control, which I didn't want to happen.

The questions that the group members asked me were nothing like the questions I had planned in my mind... for some reason I found it really difficult to express myself clearly. For example, when I answered the question 'where do you see yourself ten years from now', I said something along the lines of having a family and children, and I'd be preparing dinner, when my husband comes home from work. It is true that I do have a strong sense of family values and I tend to be quite traditional in that sense, but it is my life long dream to become an actor, and it is still my dream, and one day I hope to fulfil it. I think I may

have mentioned something about wanting to be in a soap or sitcom but I don't think I stressed how badly I wanted it. Maybe the fact that I didn't discuss it enough is significant in its own way, I know that having a close family is the most important thing to me and if it meant I'd have to put my career on hold then I probably would.

*I did not share enough*

*Although group members often talked about a fear of disclosing too much in the hot-seat the majority of co-researchers have reported that they felt they did not share enough with the group during the time they were in the chair.*

I wanted to disclose information about myself, I just could not think of anything to say. All in all I felt very dissatisfied with my experience of the hot-seat, it seemed to me to be very much lacking in content compared with some of the others... it's funny because quite a few people mentioned how they wished they had said more, or came across differently. When I walked away from the seat I remember feeling that there was so much more that I wanted to say but wasn't sure what exactly.

I mentioned to the other group members how I didn't feel satisfied with what I had said about myself. But they responded by telling me what they had learnt about me as a result of this exercise. This is a problem that I have also experienced in life, for example when I meet people for the first time I always try to give off a good impression but I tend to criticise myself afterwards thinking about all the things I could have talked about, and never thinking positively about the impression that I give.

There was always a feeling of owing the group something. I felt as though I'd let the group down, as though I'd not given the group enough personal information about myself, and the information I had given I hadn't clearly explained why it was significant to me and why I shared what I did.

One of the main points to be made was that people felt they were not asked the 'right' questions. For example ##### and ##### felt they did not meet us know anything of much significance when they were in the hot-seat, and consequently felt there was more that they wanted to say. There was a consensus that when someone was asked a question that we thought, 'I wish I was asked that'. Perhaps if we had more time, we each could have addressed these issues further and left feeling that we had shared enough with the group. However, with regards to ##### and #####, I felt that I had learnt a considerable amount from them both. Also, most group members expressed to them the same feeling and they seemed more pleased that they had, in fact, revealed more than they had first realised.

### Disclosure

Were there things that I would not have shared or felt uncomfortable sharing? The answer is probably yes. There are things that I would have been uncomfortable answering, but I didn't believe that these aspects of myself would be asked about. I trusted the other members of the group to only ask questions that would not make me feel uncomfortable to answer.

I think what made me so nervous was the anticipation that I was about to reveal things about myself to people who apart from within the group, I didn't know that well. I could not be certain that after my hot-seat, everyone would still like me. They may have thought I was silly, selfish, or self-pitying. I just had to rely on the vibe I had picked up from the group already.

I was very self conscious and sceptical when it came to freely 'opening up' to the group as I felt we were all strangers to each other. The hot-seat experience has allowed me to allow others to gain an insight into the true me. I felt for some reason, maybe with the passage of time or creation of deeper relationships within the group and with specific individuals that there was some element connected with the whole experience which made me feel as if it was necessary to open up and allow 'this' group of individuals to learn about the true me.

Although I was anxious (and just to go and contradict myself again), I was still curious as to see what aspects of my life others would be interested in. Through learning about others a strong urge arose within me to want to allow others to learn about me. I love talking about myself. I am very open and willing to allow people to get to know me. I wanted to grab every chance I had to let people on the course get to know me because I had such a difficult beginning there.

I feel that one of the main concerns regarding this hot-seat exercise was that we would have been able to control what would happen to us while we were in the hot-seat itself in terms of what we would, and could disclose, "All the time you choose what information to

send about yourself. How skilled are you at letting others know about you?" (Jones, 1996). *This is relevant to the subject of 'relating' as well as the hot-seat experience.*

We were subjected to high levels of revealing personal information and self-disclosure, which created an unexplainable energy. At times this concept was scary and very intimidating for me because I felt others were being open and I was feeling pressured to also be open, at times making me feel vulnerable and insecure. #####'s feelings seemed to be triggered by #####'s hotseat and when it was her turn in the chair, she took the opportunity to explore these feelings and help us to understand them too.

"It has been found that disclosure of one's experiences is most likely when the other person is perceived as a trustworthy person of good will and/or one who is willing to disclose his experience to the same depth and breadth" (Jourard, 1971: 65).

The hot-seat became something which we initially didn't want to do, into something we were all looking forward to doing, which can only be a positive thing. It is only now after the experience I can say I have difficulty in verbalising and expressing my problems, whilst before the experience I felt as though I simply 'didn't want to' express my problems.

I wanted to share so much and I'd consciously decided before hand that I would share everything but as soon as the moment came, or the right question was asked I closed up and gave very quick undetailed answers. I was me but I felt as though I hadn't done myself or the group justice. I feel as though I was revealing personal things about myself

subtly that perhaps others could not pick up on, or even see a reason to pick up on unless they knew my past.

The hot-seat was a place where I could share things about myself, about what has been my past and what has made me who I am and what I want from life, but not telling everything. There were things I said in my 'hot-seating' that I don't think I have shared before.

### Climate

It was the atmosphere, created by the group, the way it was, and the way that it developed that both allowed the hot-seat to happen and was furthered by the experience of the hot-seat.

I didn't feel that the group would judge or reject me on the basis of the experience, I didn't feel that I would be presented with comments suggesting that I had done something wrong, or to be guilty about. These things also allowed me to enjoy the experience of others. I really felt part of the group, as though I was more welcome.

I'm not sure if the group changed in any way, but from the hot-seat we certainly felt more comfortable with each other, we felt closer and we grew stronger. I remember experiencing feelings of safety and comfort within the group unit as the trust and honesty emerged. As I began to feel comfortable and at ease with the group and its members I could somehow feel an enormous amount of warmth, love, compassion and trust, as



individuals expressed personal and revealing information about themselves, which I believe the hot-seat experience developed.

I feel this notion related to the concept of intimacy, the idea that everyone involved was just as vulnerable as I was and that created an element of familiarity as well as the idea that through self disclosure we were creating a closeness and understanding therefore building self-confidence while creating a collective group confidence (Tubbs, 1990?)

I believe that the expression of a very personal matter some of the members decided to share only made the bond closer and helped us as a group to reach a level of intimacy that became probably our greatest achievement of our time spent together as a group. It felt like we'd reached a place of total acceptance and the feelings that we're being generated around the group could be felt by everyone.

One thing that was clear was that everyone was interested in what everyone had to say. It was nice to see that everyone was accepted at face value, and there were never any doubts regarding this issue. This level of acceptance by everyone, even in terms of their negative aspects, gave everyone the freedom to be themselves and not have to put on 'a front' with regards to who they were. It was also apparent that everyone was listened to with everyone else's undivided attention. This became clearer when we reviewed the experience, due to everyone feeling that they were listened to properly. "Listening is far more than simply hearing a string of words: it is being able to assemble those words so that a picture emerges of another person's life" (Burnard 1999:57). This ability to listen properly aided me in being able to understand everyone better with regards to who they

were and what is important to them. This is one of the main reasons why the hot-seat experience was vital to our group development – it helped us all put aside our own lives and focus on someone else for a change. It was also valid in the sense that we were able to develop the skills needed to disclose more things about ourselves, and hence develop our present and future relationships.

I believe that this level of understanding between us all, aided us to open up more and hence grow and develop into a strong group who had a lot of mutual respect and admiration for each other. The level of honesty projected onto others is essentially the glue that bound our group together.

#### *The individual inquiry process*

“Groups promote self-understanding by exposing us to the unknown areas of ourselves”  
(Forsyth, 1999).

I found there were things I did not know about myself. I often question my self-worth or compare myself too much with others. Dealing with other people’s emotions is not really my strong point. However, through my dealings with the group, I think I have improved how I cope in such situations, I do not find them as daunting.

I had the chance to say out loud the things that are personal to me. It therefore gave me the chance to increase my awareness of myself. It isn't that I did not know these things before, but that they were never said out loud and officially recognised by me before.

I personally find it difficult to trust and aired this to the group, yet I feel this experience has allowed me to trust, whether it was the group and it's individuals or the environment and the expression of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence, this is still unclear.

I can relate to one co-researchers experience on a similar level because I grew up in a town with hardly any Jewish people and I went to a strict Catholic secondary school where I was the only Jewish girl and I also had to be careful what I said for fear of being misunderstood.

It is only now, after the experience I can say that I have difficulty in verbalising and expressing my problems, whilst before the experience I felt s though I simply 'didn't want' to express my problems.

Even though I did learn a lot about myself from being in the hot-seat, I felt that I learnt the most about myself as well as the others, when everyone else was in the hot-seat.

I've admitted and confirmed in my head issue of my past I'd been repressing and trying to forget, and as a person I'm now trying to deal with these issues in my own way. I've learnt

about my own prejudices, flaws and elements of my personality I wasn't even aware of through relating with the other members of my group and reflecting on my own experience within the hot-seat. I wasn't expecting to learn quite so much about myself as I did from the experience.

#### Outcomes, learning and understanding

I feel as though I understand them all much better now. I am unable to accurately recount what people have said but I am left with a feeling and a warmth and a closeness about the group. The group shared the experience of each member in the hot-seat.

For a while we sat in our little group learning little by little but I'm not sure if we were learning *why* we were there. I believe the hot-seat got us to see why and know so much more about how groups function as individuals and how we develop in terms of the group and within ourselves.

I think I said a lot about me, though the group probably didn't hear everything I don't think that was necessary. Even with people I already felt a connection with through their hot-seats there were elements of information which extended my understanding of them.

I feel the hot-seat experience allowed me to stay motivated and focused on the groups function and process, because my interest to learn about others therefore creating an

awareness of difference and similarities within individuals. As my metaphorical opening suggests, it wasn't a smooth or relaxing task due to the emotionally charged experiences both as a researcher and participator. As the confidence and trust occurred it was apparent that the hot-seat experience had created an effective method of action whereby it triggered off a shift within the leadership and roles within the group. It was observed that as the confidence and trust occurred it was apparent that the hot-seat experience had created an effective method of action whereby it triggered off a shift within the leadership and roles within the group. It was observed that the experience allowed each member to equally have their say about themselves, allowing the more silent and withdrawn members to express themselves.

When I meet people for the first time I always try to give off a good impression but I tend to criticise myself afterwards thinking about all the things I could have talked about, and never thinking positively about the impression that I give. Through this hot-seat exercise I have become aware of the fact that this is due to my own insecurities, and I have realised the importance of having more faith in myself and in other people's judgements.

The hot-seat exercise made me look at group members in a different light. It meant that I was able to see a clearer picture of their personalities. It seemed to me that the hot-seat gave us a purpose and a reason to continue. There was a moment where a connection was felt. This can best be described as a warmth, where it brings the group together and I believe it is related to a coming together of each individual's energies, all of our attention was focused and we had moved on as a group.

As a group we were communicating and understanding one another but not always necessarily verbally. I feel as though I know things about the other members – like a feeling or a sense of knowing something about them, although if I were asked what that feeling was I would have difficulty explaining it or even knowing it.

I suppose the main aspect that has emerged from us doing the exercise is how it enabled us all to become more open, with ourselves as well as each other. Not only that, these skills will be carried on in life and consequently help us to become more honest and open in other aspects of our lives. We all became more aware of our own feelings, and I strongly believe that it is as a result of learning to ‘tune in’ with other people’s feelings also. This is due to the ability to emphasis (*empathise?*) more with others.

# **Appendix 8**

## **Fictional Group Story**

We met on a wet autumn morning and I walked into the room with soggy leaves stuck the bottom of my shoes like extra soles. I could feel bits of leaf peeling off onto the rough carpet and I wasn't sure whether the right thing was to pick them up off the carpet - so I left them where they were.

I searched for familiar faces and met with a couple of smiles and a few heads bent down over papers that were shuffling through hands as if the person inside was sorting out some important stuff but really they were avoiding my gaze and avoiding striking up a conversation with anyone else. I felt a sense of warmth knowing this would change and then paralysed with fear at the idea that it might not.

I nestled myself in between a smiler and an avoider leaving a space for Paul. When Paul came in he sat opposite. We sat for a couple of minuets and then Paul slowly said, "O.k. there are one or two others we'll give them a couple of minuets before we start" and we were silent again. "Can I ask you about my dissertation?" asked one of the girls who had been smiling at me as I came in. Paul smiled and answered with a little laugh just sneaking out in between the words as he spoke, "of course, at least you're thinking about it". A few others butted in with questions that started with, "So could I?..." and lots of groans about how they couldn't decide what to research and that they couldn't do it at all. After a while Paul put a stop to things by saying, "well I guess the others aren't coming and if they turn up they can catch up anyway so I suppose we had better make a start on



whatever it is we're doing". A couple of people laughed and others looked up with either a startled or slightly confused expression.

During that first session time seemed to just drift out of the window. Nothing really seemed to happen. I think we may have even been avoiding any kind of focus on what the group was about. Paul talked about different approaches to research and therapy that we might use, he said he would bring in some references and papers and things the following week. I think only me, Paul and one other girl – I think she was called Sasha said anything at all.

The following week seemed to get colder and to tell you the truth I didn't think about the group at all, I was busy doing nothing, settling into the life of a new term at the university. Having said this I felt excited as I walked into college that Thursday morning and I looked forward to seeing the group. I tried to count them in my head, there were four and me, and Paul and two were missing so eight of us would be researching this year. There was one boy (should I call him a boy?) and I wondered how he would get on, he had smiled a couple of times last week but the rest of the time he had looked at his feet, which I could understand if he had new shoes on but he was wearing really old battered trainers, once white, now brown and I could see he was itching to start peeling off bits of leather that had scuffed away around the sides.

The room seemed warmer as I walked in. I realised the light was on and the orange glow made the circle of chairs look inviting and I am sure everyone was smiling

this time. Paul was there already and two girls were giggling a few seats away from him. There was another girl sat with one chair in between Paul and herself and I thought how it was like a bus – where nobody wants to sit right next to someone they don't really know if they can help it. The boy – Matt apparently- came in next and smiled but didn't say anything and then sat down on the opposite side – near the door. Sasha came in next and said she was sorry she was late but she had to post a card and she didn't have a stamp and it wouldn't have mattered but it was her Aunts birthday and she would sulk if the card didn't arrive on time. I felt instant warmth for Sasha as she told this story as she gabbled like me but at the same time I was erm jealous is the wrong word but I saw she was going to take some kind of place in the group that I thought would be mine. Then in walked a girl I didn't recognise from the previous week, she looked a little apprehensive and Paul invited her in.

She sat in between Matt and Sasha and they dwarfed her.

“It occurred to me that we didn't introduce ourselves properly last week and as Josie and Helen are with us this week it seems the right time to do that so if we just say who we are and maybe something about why we are here that might help get us going – Zinni do you want to start because the others might not recognise you?”

“O.K.” I reply thinking about how they might not like me, “I'm Zinni, and I'm here because I always am, and I like doing these group things and I am doing postgraduate research into approaches to research that are a bit different er collaborative like this and creative and on yourself and stuff” I know I am babbling

so I cut it off, “so I look forward to getting to know you and seeing what we research”.

One by one the others introduce themselves. Within the next few minutes I understand each person a little more and I start to feel the essence of the group. Suddenly it seems like everything is going to be alright, like the group will gel and we will really uncover something from our time together. It feels like my life will fall into place as well, there is some kind of comfort in having this group of people with whom there will be an exclusive relationship, a contact on a very personal level – they will come to know my person and each of their personalities will develop my knowledge and understanding.

The introductions take half of the session and we go for coffee. We sit together and I have a cinnamon swirl and coffee and Paul is laughing with some of the other group members about something that happened in one of the other groups in which they work together. This leads us into the other half of our morning and we talk about all sorts of everyday things; shopping and eating and going out with friends.

The next week comes around quickly and we settle straight into being together. Now we seem to be on equal footing like we have all known one another for the same length of time even though some members of the group have been working together for three years and some have only just met. It strikes me that it is almost as if we were all strangers in the beginning even Paul and I, who have known each other in these settings and out of them for years. We are getting to know each other in this group, getting to know who we are together I suppose.

The conversation is about housemates started off by the fact that Helen and Jo live together and they are moaning about one of the people they live with. “I just can’t handle it” says Amina, “I just go to my room, I mean why people can’t just put a knife in a dishwasher – we’ve got a dishwasher! Arrrgh it just makes me really angry, a knife, and the dishwasher is just there and the money – don’t even get me started we spent four hours going over the phonebill last night – four hours! People just won’t claim their phonecalls and we are arguing over a twenty three pence call – I mean twenty three pence how petty – but I’m damned if I’m paying it – I didn’t make the call.” We giggle at her frustration, she is so organised and particular and I can see the rest of them can just picture the way she is at home with her housemates, she is the kind of person you can’t imagine living with students.

We all have stories about arguments and situations and I realise I am probably the annoying person to live with rather than the person who gets irritated by those I live with. I smile to myself imagining how Amina would cope with me and my mess. For the way she is different from me I feel a sudden affection and I feel warm thinking about those people who do put up with me. We are carried away with our discussion and go for a break late.

When we come back Jo says, “imagine what it would be like if we lived together” and it isn’t just me who laughs out loud.

“It would be like Big Brother” I say and Helen laughs and agrees, “definitely but we would only have Paul and Matt for blokes which would be a bit of a downer with the hot-tub and

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“I think that’s an insult” Paul says, “but I’m not sure, maybe not”.

“I just wouldn’t do it” Sasha pipes up.

“Do what go on big brother or live with us lot?” asks Matt.

“Well either really, I just wouldn’t live with people I don’t know like that – no offence or anything to you all but that’s the way I am it takes me a while to get close to people and I don’t live with people I’m not close to”.

“ I would love to” I say, “I’d go on big brother if it wasn’t for the cameras I like the idea of being put in a situation with people I don’t know”.

“Like this” Paul states.

“Well yes” I reply, “It is like people are thrown together who wouldn’t normally be friends and you make quite intense relationships”.

The others looked worried as if they were now expected to be close to me in some way. I wondered whether other people really did want to work in this close and personal way as I did and how we would research collaboratively without that intimacy.

For the next couple of weeks there seemed to be some kind of barrier in the group. We hadn't fallen out with one another we just seemed to be distant from one another and our conversations seemed to be about filling time rather than being interested in what others had to say. Amina asked every five minutes where we were going and when we would reach a decision on our topic suggesting brainstorming and each putting our subject idea into a hat to see if we thought the same thing but she got little response and we never actually did any of these things.

At least Amina kept her attention on the group, one week Helen brought in some work for another area of the course and sat writing with the explanation, "We aren't doing anything here so I may as well be some work out of the way – we have so much". It surprised me that it was Amina who said, "Well I don't think we'll get anywhere if we all just sit doing our own thing".

"Well yes", agreed Paul, "I think we at least need to be present in mind and spirit to get anywhere and I'm not so sure we are doing nothing I think perhaps the Christmas break will allow us some time to 'incubate' as Moustakas would put it."

"About Christmas" I butt in, "can't we have some kind of Christmas thing?"

“Yeh”, says Matt, “lets have a party”

“Or a night out” joins Jo

“Oh god can you imagine it, that would be a laugh a minuet” Sasha says sarcastically but I don’t think anyone picked up on it immediately.

“Where would we go?” says Jo getting a little excited until she is shot down completely by

Sasha who makes clear she would not be devoting her evenings to us, “I was joking there is no way I am going on a night out with the group I mean why? I am just being honest I just wouldn’t turn up it just sounds daft”

“Well I didn’t really mean go out I just thought we could do something in group – bring something in, food, something to do with Christmas or something” I explain.

“So all bring in something to eat and have some kind of party?” Paul reflects in his usual way.

“That would be so depressing in this room” says Jo and as she says it I completely agree.

“Lets go out for Christmas dinner to the pub across the road” suggests Matt and we all smile, this seems to suit everyone.

“We could stay on and have a drink afterwards”. Helen is pleased it is turning into an event.

“So this is a meeting in addition to our usual session I am presuming because it is lunch” Paul begins

“Well we could just come in later instead for the last session” interrupts Helen.

Everyone else cries out “No” which really touches me, there is such a commitment and even an enjoyment about whatever it is we are doing together that we all want to sit in this room talking about not much in particular and we couldn’t possibly miss it.

“It would be a shame to miss the last session and in a way I think it is kind of important we always meet here for our time together as usual” I say

“Yes I agree” says Paul, “We could do something fun or Christmassy to get us in the mood”

“Lets decorate the room” Jo pipes up

“Oh yeh, get a great big tree” laughs Matt

“But we could all bring in one decoration from home or something – you know you always have those decorations that go up year after year you know and we could talk about

Christmas past – Christmas past present and future” I am getting excited

“Oh so a Christmas Carol thing I like the sound of that” says Paul



“But we aren’t all at home I won’t be able to get anything” says Jo

“Well I suppose those of us who aren’t at home could improvise – make something or try and find something the same as the item we would have brought in” Josie joins in. “Well yes there is always going to be something that we could each share to tell the group about our Christmas” Paul replies, he turns to Amina and says, “I am aware that you might not celebrate Christmas and...”

Amina laughs before he finishes and says, “oh no we do sort of do Christmas in our house”.

Paul closes the session, “Well that is all we have time for this week so we have next week and then the week after is our Christmas ‘do’ O.k. I’m looking forward to that and we will meet next time”.

I couldn’t stop thinking about what I was going to take in to describe my Christmas. I thought it would be easy but I couldn’t think of anything that summed up Christmas for me. Was there a decoration that we always put up? There had been but I had left them when I had moved out of a house I was living in once. There wasn’t an angel I had made at nursery school or a prized decoration we all brought out to finish off the Christmas tree. In fact anything I had made my mum had discarded a few Christmases before saying she wanted a “tasteful Christmas tree”. So what made our Christmas special?

Our Christmas ‘do’ came around and I was excited because I had thought of the most obvious and perfect thing to take in. I clutched my pop up ‘The Night Before

Christmas' under my arm like it was the crown jewels and as I left the house I grabbed my mum and dad's comical personal Christmas card.

Everyone was sat expectantly when I arrived and I noticed nearly everyone had something clutched on their knee as if they were hiding it with their hands ready to reveal their hidden treasure. Matt didn't have anything on his knee and I wondered if he had brought something.

"I'm going to go first" said Paul, "because I am the oldest and my Christmas came first and because I want to". I smiled, already it felt like we were all kids on Christmas morning waiting to open our presents.

Paul had brought in a stocking he said it wasn't *'the'* stocking because that had disappeared years ago but the one he had brought in his sister had bought him about twenty years ago because it was very similar to the one he had as a child. Paul talked about lumps of coal and oranges in the same way my mum does and he was smiling with his eyes in a childlike way.

You could almost feel Paul's Christmas and I felt nostalgic about a time I had never lived in and I felt sad that he had to grow up. Most of all I thought about my stocking, I should have brought it in, when I was young I thought it was enormous I remember dragging it into my mum's room on Christmas morning full of presents but now it looks small. When you are little things seem so big.

Matt hadn't brought anything in because he had nothing he felt could represent his Christmas but he told us the story of Christmas Eve and Christmas day as it is lived in his house. They would have drinks every Christmas Eve and the neighbours would come round. He described the house as being decorated with real holly and ivy because his mum loved doing that kind of thing and how he would go to bed when he was young and he now knew his mum and dad and their friends would have put all his presents under the tree, playing at Father Christmas. He said it was almost as if his mum didn't go to bed because he would wake up in the morning and go downstairs and she would be in the kitchen preparing the Christmas dinner. It sounded a bit of a sad story in a way, I suppose because he is an only child and the thought of him going downstairs on his own to see if Santa had been seemed a bit lonely – and I don't like that presents under the tree thing a stocking is much better!

Everyone had a different tradition that their family respected each year but the one thing that was the same was the idea that tradition and ritual were important. My book was the story I had read to me every Christmas Eve and only on Christmas Eve every year. I picked up parts of everybody's Christmas that I recognised in my own but also saw differences. It felt like Christmas in that room, like all our memories had merged and we sat there like a family exchanging stories. We hung our decorations around the room (well there were only four and two of those were Jo's) which felt ceremonial and like the family decorating the tree. Paul asked if I would like to read out the night before Christmas (the book I had brought) but I couldn't possibly because it wasn't Christmas eve but we all had a go at remembering it because that is allowed.

It was strange that we then headed out for Christmas dinner and it was beginning to feel more and more like a condensed Christmas. We had turkey and all the trimmings and out of our usual room we were different together – closer in a way. I realised I actually liked all these people in a way that was more than making the best of the fact that I had to work with them – I actually liked them and even Sasha who had always seemed so blunt and hard and mature suddenly softened and was like a little girl; she was vulnerable and excited and happy all at once and I had never thought it possible that she could be any one of those things. We ate and felt contented and drank and a few stayed on until the evening as I found out after Christmas. I felt sorry I hadn't stayed but I'd had to leave at three o'clock.

When we met again in January there was a sombre feel in our room. I don't know why but everybody seemed quiet and we didn't have much to say to each other even Paul didn't keep things going in his usual way. It wasn't until the following week that people began to moan about how we were doing nothing again and making suggestions about spider diagrams. I wondered what had happened over Christmas that had changed the way we were together. Maybe it was just the reality that we needed to produce something for assessment.

Jo suggested that we each take it in turns to talk about what we think we could research to which I said "or what we are already researching". Matt said that he thought it was something about how we understand or see each other because we had spent our time getting to know one another and even though we were very different from one another we were learning about each other's lives.

“To be quite honest with you” Sasha started up, “I don’t think any of you really know me and that is not me being disrespectful or anything its just I wouldn’t like to think that this group of people who haven’t really known me for that long even those of you I have worked with since level one, you know it’s not like you know me like you’re family or anything”.

Paul was frowning in a not angry but thinking kind of a way and I knew what sort of thing he was going to say before he even said it. “Well I’m not sure that any of us would claim to know you on a level that is equal to your family I think that Matt was talking about accepting one another and being aware of one another I don’t know” he looks at Matt.

“Yeh just really I don’t know like getting to know one another but really it isn’t like acquaintances or something but getting to know each other deeper or something – I’m not sure, it just seems different”

“I know what you mean” said Jo and at this moment I noticed Helen wasn’t there, “When you get to know people, like in a pub or something, as friends it’s usually like you know you are into the same things where as here it is like we have to get to know one another because of who we are if you get what I mean”

“We learn something about what makes us who we are rather than what we do I think, it is about understanding the essence of the person” I try and find words for something I think we can all understand but can’t quite explain.

“This is all very nice” Amina butts in forcefully, “but I can’t see how this is going to help us do some assignment which we don’t even know what it is...” she looks with daggers at Paul, “and I’m sorry but I need the assignment more than I need new friends and it is stressing me out”.

“Two things about that” Paul begins, “Firstly I don’t think this is just about making ‘new friends’ even though some of us would like to feel we could be classed as friends on some level, it is more about encounter and engagement with one another which I think is a valuable process and hopefully will get us somewhere in the end and secondly the assignment is probably something we should be thinking about now but that is something we need to decide on together”. Amina rolls her eyes and I can see she just wants to be given something she can get on with doing, Paul laughs, he has seen it too.

The following week things seem more focused and there is a flurry of ideas about what we could do for the assignment ranging from traditional essay ideas to more creative ideas about acting out our experience in some kind of play. We were looking for some way of conveying to an audience the essence of what we had been researching and then of course we came across the question, ‘what *have* we been researching? It seemed that no matter what each person suggested somebody would object. All our ideas were about either relationships we had made within the group or those we had made outside of it during the course of our lives. Despite the obvious link between the two subjects neither felt right for every person in the

group and so we went round and round in circles. What had seemed such a positive start with so much energy from everyone had turned into frustration again.

We went for coffee and I noticed that Paul didn't join us.

When we returned from our break Paul had paper in his hands, not like him to bring handouts. "I thought I might type out some of the ideas about the assignment we had last week so we had a few options in front of us because despite what we were talking about this morning I think we do need to submit something for assessment and it doesn't necessarily matter that we haven't decided on a topic, perhaps this will form part of what you can talk about, or we can, or whatever."

Paul handed out the list of ideas from the previous week and we all stared at them. For some reason the conversation turned back to the subject of our inquiry. I think the fact that we couldn't agree when individually we felt we had learnt something or come to some understanding that we thought was a mutual or group understanding was deflating and we wanted a word that would sum up these individual understandings into something that belonged to us all.

The problem was this searching for one word or definition that explained the 'something' that we had been researching, but it was clear to all of us that there was something; there was a theme to our conversations and we had actually created some kind of group understanding.

"We need to all get down on paper our own thoughts and then maybe we can share each story and maybe understand each other's and what we think together and

things” said Josie and though it was unusual for her to make a suggestion it sounded almost forceful and Paul asked whether this could be one of the assignments, everyone could submit their own story and their own understanding of the research and then we could build our group picture or story which we could discuss for the second assignment. It just all seemed to fall into place and suddenly we knew something about where we were going.

I thought it would be so easy to write about my experience of the group, what I had learnt and how it had informed my life as well as being some kind of academic development of knowledge, in fact it was more about who I was than it being an academic thing. Where should I begin and what should I include, where does it end? I began to write about my childhood, I don’t know why but it seemed like that was where the story started. I talked about people who were important in my life and how I came to know them and I didn’t know how this was relevant to the time I had spent with a group of people in a dingy university classroom but that was what I was writing about.

I began to realise that I was focusing on people who I had ‘got to know’ rather than those who had always been a part of my life or who had merged into it over time. I suddenly saw the relevance to the research group; my story was about a quicker or more forced, no forced isn’t the right word, more intense process of coming to know someone well. I didn’t write this explicitly in the piece I was preparing for the group, I put something about how I felt I had come to know each member of the group on a personal level and that was it really, I finished my ‘essay’ abruptly and printed out the copies. I realised I had written loads.



We sat round in our room which suddenly felt cold again. Each of us had some paper on our lap, captured within it our time together, every one telling a different story of the same journey. I noticed Helen wasn't there, her absence physically represented by the gap in the circle where just an empty chair sat. After the first couple of people read their accounts I began to think I had not really written the right thing. Their stories struck a cord with me, they seemed to be more focused on the group, and both of them talked about the experience of getting to know people. Paul read his account next which contained as many questions as it did statements although these questions seemed to represent the experience more somehow, perhaps because we had never arrived at an answer. I then started on my drivelling life story but as I read it I no longer felt it was so off the mark, it seemed to mirror what the other members had written about the group and their own lives. Josie waited until last, only ever wanting to speak when she was invited to, but it was her work that tied everything together. She had written about each member of the group and what she had written felt so accurate, she summed up each of us and how she had come to understand us in a way that made us all realise how we understood each other. It was confirmation that although Josie had seemed to interact the least, in that she had spoken the least, she was very much engaged in the group and the group process. I suppose we were quite stunned with the quality of her observations and she was noticeably pleased with the way we had reacted to her work.

We only had two weeks remaining yet it felt like we could go on forever in this group. Paul asked whether we should try and make some kind of synthesis of our

individual reports so the following week we spent the morning discussing how we could do this and didn't really come up with any ideas. After the break we began to talk about how next week was our last session and everyone seemed a little sad at the fact we were coming to the end of our time together. We decided to mark the end of our research by each bringing in some kind of food and having a pot luck picnic either in our room or outside somewhere depending on the weather. My mind moved onto food and away from research.

So the last supper came around and it was a nice day so we sat under the trees outside the room we had been working in. Jo had brought a blanket so we spread it out and put our various dishes on it. Matt had brought sausage rolls and cakes. I had made Greek Salad and unusually for my disorganised character I had remembered to bring some plastic forks. Amina brought vegetable pakora made by her grandma who apparently she had been telling all about us every week. Josie had brought tiny bite sized sandwiches just like her mother used to make her when she was little. Helen had loads of cakes with her and Paul had dips and crackers so all together we had a nicely balanced meal. Paul had also brought some big pieces of paper and pens in case we decided to do some kind of final output for our research. We didn't have any particular intention of doing this but we all began to doodle on corners of the two pieces of paper and by the end of our last meeting we kind of had something that was a picture of our group and what we had learnt. We didn't have time but I am sure if we had sat and talked about this piece it would have become clear that each doodle represented a little bit of each person's experience and character and it was nice that it was all laid down in one big mess of drawing that for some reason looked a lot like our time together. One by one we

said our goodbyes until only Paul and I were left under the tree picking up pens and bits of paper. “Well”, he said, “I think that worked”. “I don’t know how”, I replied, “but I do think I’ll miss it”. Paul smiled and we walked off towards the canteen knowing that we would reflect on this research and more importantly think about those we had done it with every time we went through that process of a stranger becoming someone who is a part of our lives and even a part of who we are.